





Bowen's
THE BUTLER

IN BOHEMIA.

BY

E. NESBIT & OSWALD BARRON. *SW*

LONDON,
HENRY J. DRANE,

SALISBURY HOUSE, SALISBURY SQUARE, E.C.

1894.

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1894

TO RUDYARD KIPLING

Round you like children in a ring
The Kingdoms and the Power and Glory
Sit waiting for another story—
Another of the songs you sing.

Made whole and merry from your store
A sick world leaves its chills and fevers—
We stand among the true believers
Who leave their slippers at your door.

Though, where your place is set aloft,
In clouds a great world's incense lingers
Lean down and touch with kindly fingers
This seisin of a little croft.

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THE BUTLER IN BOHEMIA.

"THE bread is £3 9s.!"

"And the milk?" I queried.

"I don't know what the milk is, but it won't leave itself any longer until it's paid for."

"And the butcher?"

There was a perfectly respectful but firmly delivered knock at the front door.

"There is the butcher," said Yvette, rising affrightedly from her wickerwork chair; "he told Ada yesterday, while he was cutting the steak, that he meant to come up to-day and see the master personally."

"The master" hurled himself before his wife's pretty red slippers, and implored her to save him from this interview—to the consternation of Ada, who, having found her second tap disregarded, loomed apologetic in the doorway.

"Please, 'm, the butcher."

"Your mistress will see him, Ada," I said briskly, but with a glance of agonised entreaty.

"Coward!" Yvette muttered, dramatically, as she swept past me on her way to the dining-room. I followed her to the door, and saw through its crack that Mr. Poulter, the butcher, had already placed his tall hat on one chair, and was sitting on another, with an unmistakable determination to come to an understanding with the man who cowered from him behind a woman's skirts.

"Don't give me up," I whispered after my wife. "Say I'm in Spain."

I leant against the closed drawing-room door, listening to the noise of the field I had fled. No words were to be distinguished, but yet I could hear Yvette's chirping treble rise and fall, and through it the Gregorian accompaniment of Mr. Poulter's indignant reproaches. Ages seemed to pass before the booming fire of the enemy slackened and ceased. I followed Yvette's voice through the whole campaign. I knew when she was glad that Mr. Poulter had called, when she was distressed to hear how long the account had been standing, and recognised the graver tones in which she expressed her regret that my absence from home had prevented

my seeing Mr. Poulter personally. A lighter key succeeded, having in it something of triumph, and I knew that Mr. Poulter was for the time out-generalled and out-talked. I stepped out stealthily into the hall, and threw the guilty evidence of my own soft hat into the drawing-room; my sympathy with my wife was leading me to execute the opening steps of a *pas-de-victoire* under the reindeer's head, when the dining-room door opened suddenly, and I fled.

From a chink in the blind I watched Mr. Poulter go slowly away. The sun was shining upon the two flowering laburnum trees swaying gently with the breeze, and I could have wept when I reflected that Nature permitted such an one as Mr. Poulter to co-exist with them on a June morning.

My wife rejoined me dolefully. I twisted a little branch from the fire-grate into a really effective laurel-crown, and I crowned her with it, but she took it off and said bitterly, that it was "all very well."

"I have beaten him off," she pursned gloomily, "but I know it will be only for a little while."

"Did you tell him I was in Spain?"

"No," she replied, "I couldn't say anything so untruthful as that even to save

us from a butcher. But I told him you were in Manchester, and I was expecting you home every day. And I told him you positively panted to see him. But what's the good?" she added, sitting down despairingly, "even if he were burnt up to-morrow with all his books, there's the fishmonger, and the milkman and the green-grocer, and the man who bound Kipling in vellum. I know why it is—it's because we've had nothing but chops."

"The judgment of heaven!" I agreed. "Of course chops don't inspire confidence. Order a saddle of mutton and have a dinner-party. I have always noticed that a policy of chops hastens the crisis."

As far as the tradespeople were concerned, we could not have thought of a better thing. The ten days before that dinner were the calmest we had spent for months.

The single knock almost ceased in the land. There grew about us a sort of virtuous hush, an ordered ease, as of folk who paid weekly. We touched the high watermark of visionary affluence the day I called at the Briar Farm Dairy, and, complaining of the quality of the milk, ordered two quarts of double cream for the dinner. We asked the nicest people we knew, and from a mere hoodwinking of creditors, the dinner grew to a pleasing

social prospect. We asked Summersales, the colourist; Hicks-Hake, the wall-paper designer; and Fawkesfield, the Socialist. The Johnson-Dows came and brought their cousin, the first violin; then Malpas Smith, of the *Sunday Sentinel*, came with his wife and sister. It was a nice little party. Summersales, who lives at Brighton, came to breakfast, and most of the others came about twelve o'clock. We had bread and cheese and beer for lunch, and walked round our absurd little garden plot, smoking pipes to kill the aphides on the rose-bushes, while Yvette sat in the middle playing the guitar.

When the day clouded over we retreated indoors to waltz in the guests' bedroom, a Blue Beard chamber kept ever locked, because we had never been able to furnish it with anything but a shelf for my boots. The locked door gave a charming air of mystery to the house. I said that our family ghost walked there by night, the "white curse of the Careys," for which reason our faithful Ada would pass the door by night with the bolt of a rabbit, and Yvette used herself to tell a story that if you looked through the key-hole at midnight you would see the floor of polished oak, the walls hung with Flemish tapestry, and a great tester bed with

drawn curtains of cloth of gold. We danced there because dinner was laid in the dining-room, and the dimensions of the drawing-room would not permit even the swinging of a kitten.

Haycraft's arrival in shiny evening dress was a little check to our happiness. He was the greengrocer, and we owed him £16 7s. 2d. Feeling that our purchase of a pine-apple would not soothe him sufficiently, Yvette had added thereto a request for his services at table during the banquet. I received him with stately cordiality, and begged him to draw himself a glass of beer to hearten himself for his task. On his replying that he never touched anything, I felt, for the first time, that his presence was a fatal error, and that he would disapprove of us. He did disapprove of us. He noted at the first glance as we trooped into the dining-room that none of us were in black. From the expression of his fish-like right eye (the left was dull and emotionless) as it fell on Summersales' peacock-blue bow, I gathered that the colour displeased him, and though Fawkesfield's jacket was buttoned over his breast, the eye of Haycraft pierced its brown material and knew of the missing waistcoat which Fawkesfield had removed when we were playing ball

in the garden in the full heat of the sun.

The dinner itself was excellent. In ordering it we had spared no expense, and, as a cook, Ada is good and plain; but Haycraft knew as well as I did that nothing on the table was paid for, and waited morosely, as one who was with us but not of us. My guests regarded him in return with ill-concealed aversion.

Said Summersales, in a moment when the fish had taken Haycraft from us, "How do you do it, old man?"

"Do what?" I returned.

"Why, harbour that sombre menial, to be sure," said Summersales. "It jars with the worldly circumstances of your guests; it is discourteous. I did my boots over last night with lamp-black and copal, that they might bear me decently hither, and you flout me to-day with your retainers."

The latter part of his statement could not have escaped Haycraft, who had noiselessly returned to the room, bearing with him a made dish as if it were the body of a murdered infant.

I turned my face from the face of Haycraft. It was not meet that I should crouch as I did before this proud serving man. Had my eyes met his, he would have read in them the apology that was near my lips.

"Haycraft," he would have read, "I confess it freely, the ways of the nobility and gentry, at whose tables you render your graceful service, are not my ways, nor the ways of these my simple friends, but, in the name of our common humanity, relax a little among these uncongenial surroundings." This I might have said had not Ada come in at that moment, saying—

"Please, sir, Mr. Claringbold."

"The next room, Ada," I said; "light the lamp with the red shade, and say that Mrs. Carey will be with him in a——" but before the sentence could be completed a heavy step fell in the doorway, and my uncle James' grey eyebrows were lowering on the revellers.

His glance swept the room. I watched it pass Summersales' necktie, and count the Tasmanian apples in the dish, at the same time that it noted my acute discomfort.

Uncle James' massive gold watch-chain (hall-marked on every link) sought to detain my eye, but I avoided its fascinations, and turned to the others.

"Yvette—Mrs. Johnson-Dow—Summersales, this is my uncle, Mr. James Claringbold."

Yvette rushed to the breach; she clasped

his large hands, she seemed to nestle against the massive curve of his waistcoat. He softened a little, bowed to the company, a guarded, not negotiable bow, and sat down. We exhibited to the full the parasitical traits of the artist class, fawning with one accord upon this hard-featured old man, with the stiff grey whiskers meeting his shaven chin. No words of mine were needed to explain that this man oozed capital at every pore. When he said the sky had an unsettled appearance for the first week in June, we loudly deplored in chorus the shortcomings of our climate, and grew jealous of the conversational success of Hicks-Hake, who boldly inquired the feeling in the City about the hop prospect. This must have touched Uncle James, for he gracefully brought forward the subject of art, which he told us he had himself encouraged to some extent during the present year by becoming the purchaser of "Your turn next" (little girl bathing dachshunds). Then Summersales took up the word, saying that this was in his opinion the picture of the year, a picture lost to the nation by the nation's apathy and the prompt discrimination of Mr. Claringbold.

Then the June evening died happily away, red and gold among the laburnums

and the little poplars on the lawn, and in the grey haze of our cigarette smoke within. My good guests pressed Uncle Claringbold's hand and bade us farewell; Ada tripped about setting the lamps and candles and drawing the curtains, and Yvette and I came back from the hall to sit over the deserted table, face to face with Uncle James.

I am his only living kinsman, and my Uncle James is an uncle *pur sang*. My fancy cannot picture him as adequately supporting any other relationship.

Fifteen—sixteen years before this dinner-party I had last seen Uncle James. Scarlet fever had broken out in my father's household, and I was sent in quarantine to Eltham, there to partake of my uncle's unwillingly extended hospitality. He sat here to-night at my table with the red flush of the lamp mantling his features and his large red hands covering his knees, just as he had sat in his horse-hair chair in the little library at Eltham on that fell day when my aunt led me thither, with the guilt hot on my brow. I had been reading "Ivanhoe" that afternoon, and knew no happiness till I had barded and caparisoned a chair with an arrangement of string and the strap of my box. Thus equipped I had felt myself free to

regard it as a Spanish jennet champing the bit so fiercely that I recognised the necessity for haltering it with my handkerchief to the knob of the door before I hurried away lightly armed with a large wooden Japanese paper-knife to seek harness for myself. In an evil moment I found my uncle's leather hat-box in his dressing-room. I removed the cover and was thoughtfully ruffling the nap of the Sunday hat, when its empty receptacle struck me in the light of a matchless tilting-helmet. Misguided boy! I completed the resemblance by cutting holes for sight and air with my pocket-knife. I had cause to wish later that I had also provided for the sense of hearing. Two minutes afterwards I was in the saddle, hewing my desperate way through a rout of Saracens to regain the Christian hosts, when my aunt fell upon me with overwhelming force. On my uncle's return from the City I was led, disarmed and humiliated, to the library, my aunt accompanying me with the evidence of crime—a veritable helmet of Mambrino, which had reassumed by foul enchantment the form of an injured hat-box. The soldier of the Cross was beaten, and painfully beaten, with the flat of his own good sword—with the Japanese paper-knife in fact.

"A heartless act of destruction," said Uncle James, breathing himself after the unwonted exercise; "only yesterday I encouraged you in your idle sports with sixpence, the initial cost of the game of ball, merely stipulating that it should be played out of reach of my windows. I have indulged your inclination for marbles, believing that that amusement, in the company of other boys, fosters sound commercial instincts, and you repay my generosity by secretly injuring my hat-box. I wash my hands of you. You must be a boy of destructive and immoral tendencies."

Somehow after that visit we drifted apart. Ten years later I had written to condole with him on the death of my aunt, and was rewarded in due course by a black-edged card with a gloomy text on it.

Feeling that this must have established a cordial feeling, I wrote again on the occasion of the good fortune of my life—my improvident marriage—and drew from my uncle a stiff note of congratulation and a plated fish-slice. Then came the wolf to prowl round our little house on Wandsworth Common, and in the spasm of agony following the return of my MS. novel by MacMurray, the publisher, I bethought me of my Uncle James, the

lonely rich man who had succeeded in jute, and I wrote him another letter, telling him in well-chosen and heart-rending phrases of our domestic difficulties.

Ten days passed, and the letter—always a forlorn hope—was almost forgotten, and now—a turn of Fortune's wheel—and Uncle James was upon us! He had drawn my unfortunate letter from his pocket and had stuck it up against a decanter for reference.

"I have here," he said, "a letter from yourself."

I could see from my place our Wandsworth address embossed in little blue capitals at the head of the missive in question.

"It is with reference to its contents that I have called on you this evening. A natural pity for the son of my poor sister Emma was aroused——"

"It was very kind," I began to falter, but he raised his hand to hush me, and went on—

——"was aroused by your remark that you were 'receiving your last crust at the grudging hand of grim poverty.'"

Mr. Claringbold peered through his spectacles to verify this quotation, which, even at that moment, struck me as having a charming literary flavour, and added—

"To-day it would appear that you have found the means to supplement that crust with some description of animal food."

I hung my head, and touched Yvette's foot under the table with a tap of agonised entreaty.

"I think," continued Uncle James, with a further reference to the document before him, "I think I am now in a position to weigh your description of your home 'made grey and desolate by the—er—blighting wing of undeserved misfortune.'"

As he rolled out the phrase, it sounded so well that I wondered even in that awful moment how any publisher could have refused a novel of mine.

"I find you," he went on, "banqueting with light-hearted companions. I find you——"

"Dear Uncle James," said Yvette, her lovely eyes filling with tears, "do not misjudge us because of our surroundings. I can hardly tell you how deceptive appearances are in the present case."

As she spoke, the tide of Uncle James' sarcasm suddenly ebbed; he sat moodily, picking almonds and raisins from the dish before him, and chewing them as if they were the cud of bitter reflection.

Said Yvette, "This banquet, as you term it, is our last effort, the last blow

we can strike. My husband is a novelist. Dear Uncle James, you know the requirements of that precarious calling?"

"On the contrary," said Uncle James, "it is a means of livelihood of which I understand but little."

"You must have seen," continued Yvette, "the dark-haired man with a beard trimmed to a point, who sat in the seat where I am now."

Uncle James was giving his attention, but possibly I listened with even more interest. It did not occur to me what part my old friend Fawkesfield played in the affairs of our house.

"That man," said Yvette, "was Mac-Murray, the publisher."

"Bless my soul!" said Uncle James, feeling that some remark was required of him. I think I gasped at the same time, but Yvette went on—

"We are in the last stage of poverty, and at the cost of my few remaining articles of jewellery, we have pandered to that man's lower nature. Under the softening influence of lamb and peas, of Burgundy and a confection of whipped cream, I have appealed to this man, a well-known gourmand, to consider a new novel by my husband. I had almost succeeded when the gooseberry tart came to

table imperfectly sweetened. He tasted it, I saw his brows knit, and I knew that all was lost."

"I had no idea," said Uncle James, "that such things were possible. But, admitted that this extravagance in the matter of viands were an advisable one, how do you, in your present circumstances, justify the presence of a manservant at table?"

Without replying for the moment Yvette rose from her seat and unfastened the doors of the sideboard with a key hanging at her girdle; she had turned rather pale and looked prettier than ever. "These files on the top shelf," she said, "are all tradesmen's bills. They now amount to nearly one hundred pounds. The patience of these people has been exhausted at last, and ah! how can I tell *you*, an upright merchant knowing nothing of these things—the man waiting at table to-day is a *man in possession*. For his dreadful trade he is not a harsh man, and when I told him myself of our hopes in giving this dinner to-night, he offered to conceal the reason for his presence by assuming an old dress suit belonging to my husband's father, and—and——"

Here Yvette broke down and sobbed upon Uncle James' shoulder at the notion

of a man in possession of our pretty little house. A little more and I should have sobbed myself.

I think Uncle James behaved well. He exacted from me a promise that I would quit my present occupation, offering me instead a stool in his office—a stool and possibilities. I would have refused, but I caught Yvette's eye and accepted with emotion. And then Uncle James sat down and called for a blotting-pad. We went over the bills together, and Uncle James, under Yvette's witchery, drew us a cheque—a bright crisp cheque—on Martin's Bank to cover the whole amount.

Holding this in his hand, he made me solemnly protest that I would never incur another liability, and when that vow was accomplished he handed the cheque to Yvette, and then he kissed her, and I felt that he bought that privilege cheaply.

Yvette fetched her hat and we walked together to Clapham Junction, where we saw Uncle James safely into his train. When we descended alone from the up platform, I said, "O Yvette, Yvette!"

I think we danced back. Ada was asleep in her chair; Haycraft, still in possession, was moodily eating sections of cheese from a plate on the kitchen table.

On the next day we paid them all—

butcher, baker, candlestick-maker, and Haycraft. Perhaps it was owing to the news of the banquet that few of them seemed surprised when Yvette and I came with the canvas bag of gold and notes from Martin's, and gave each man his due. Indeed, if we had not been so happy, the proceeding would have seemed somewhat flat. These people behaved as if the payment of accounts were an everyday proceeding. We paid them all, and yet money remained in the bag—four sovereigns and some silver. Mr. Poulter, the butcher, we paid last, and he was moved to ask for a continuance of our custom. He pointed out at the same time a glorious sirloin as an example of the type of meat he could recommend for its English and unfrozen qualities.

It was too large for three, but I think the sight put it into my heart to propose to Yvette on our way back that we should inaugurate our new and solvent career with a second and more humble banquet to the friends whom we were entertaining on the occasion of Uncle James' intrusion. We did so.

Fawkesfield was there—Fawkesfield and the Johnson-Dows, Hicks-Hake, and the violinist, Summersales, and all who were round us on that eventful evening. In

the morning Mr. Poulter himself had brought the sirloin—a sirloin fully justifying his tears of pride on leaving it at the door. To complete the hallowed association, we engaged Haycraft to lift the cover—a new Haycraft who broke the pledge during the morning on bottled stout, and in the course of the afternoon consummated this injury to his principles with mixed potations. His face shone with enthusiasm. I heard his genial laugh behind my chair at every fresh witticism from Malpas-Smith. He filled glasses and handed plates as individual acts of homage to art and letters embodied in our persons. It was a far more successful dinner than the last. That had been a funeral feast, this was a species of christening party. I told them so. I told them that henceforth I was no more of Bohemia, but of Mark Lane, and they drank uproariously the health of the new-born respectability. Yvette looked prettier and more charming than ever. I felt certain everyone must envy me. Even the passers-by turned their heads at the sound of our mirth, and gazed in across the strip of front garden at our feast. We had not pulled the blinds down. Why should we grudge others the pleasure of witnessing our enjoyment?

We sat long at table, and the shadows

deepened; the lamp, the one with the red shade, was lighted. I believe Haycraft was enjoying himself as much as any of us. Suddenly a crisp sound broke through the noise of our gaiety. I heard it boldly. What had I to fear from any footstep, or any knock, single or double? But no knock came, and I saw Yvette, who faced the window, turn suddenly pale.

"Uncle James!" she cried, and the gravel crunched again, and he was gone.

We tried to retie the thread of jollity so rudely severed, but it was a poor attempt. Our friends soon left us, resolving, no doubt, to be cautious in the future how they accepted invitations to houses where uncles might occur at any moment. Yvette and I were left looking at each other.

"Let's hope the best," she said at last; "if I could only see him I could explain."

"Of course you could;" I said, "when my last account is presented I only hope you will be allowed to go through it and explain the items. But we shall never see Uncle James again."

Nor have we. The next morning's post brought us a letter from him, in which he briefly stated his opinion of me, and pointed out how hopeless a thing it was to help a man who, when helped, plunged at once

into such sickening, heartless extravagance as to bring again upon his hearth within ten days the baneful shadow of the minion of the law. He added that my wife was too good for me, in which I quite agree with him.

"I'm sorry, dear," said Yvette, "and it serves me right for the stories I told, for they were whoppers. Why couldn't I have told him about the pine-apple being so inadequate? The publisher tale was all right. It was the butler. I never tell a lie without regretting it. Cheer up. All the debts are paid, any way. Perhaps he'll leave me something in his will."

But I don't think that's likely—at any rate not while I'm alive.

A GRAVEN IMAGE.

CHAPTER I.

It was without doubt the critical moment of my life. With the perspiration streaming down my face I made a hurried mental calculation. It meant an existence of genteel poverty for two or three years to come, but those years spent opposite the Durgâ would be more than endurable.

I made my last desperate bid. The Hebrew agent opposite leant forward and added, "And ten."

And so it was all over. Rigby, who since his bid of £350 had been sitting as at a burying, looked up with something like a wail. I took his arm and said;—

"My heart is too full for words. We'll have a cab."

He leaned on me helplessly as we pushed our way out of the crowded sale-rooms. There was some Limoges enamel coming on, which at any other time would

A GRAVEN IMAGE.

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have kept me wedged in my place for hours. Now such things were nothing to me. I left my umbrella in my seat—my umbrella and a bronze battle-axe, a most beautiful thing—and Rigby came home with me.

We drank whisky afterwards and neither talked much. I had risked a large slice of what ten years of curio-buying had left of my poor father's money. He had risked a year of his screw at the War Office. Fate and a richer man had interfered, and we had lost nothing. Small wonder that we were sad.

Lost nothing? Then what about the Durgâ, the strange and rare Indian idol. Gold and ivory, wonderfully wrought, and set with the big green stone in the forehead; the lustrous shining jewel that was not emerald and was not aqua-marine. What we had lost had not its peer in any European collection, or, as far as I knew, in the world.

I sighed, pouring out more whisky. The pleasant lamplight shone on my room, on the spoils of many lands and ages, longed for with such ardour, acquired with such joy. I really think that greeny, gleaming stone must have turned my brain, for now all these things seemed no more to me than a collection of postage stamps, or the fossils at South Kensington.

I wandered round the room, taking up one little treasure after another, and mechanically flicking the day's dust from them with my pocket-handkerchief. Why had I been born to joy in these beautiful things? Why wasn't I like the man on the floor below, whose books were scientific, dog-eared and paper-covered; and who only wanted the head of a mastodon to make him happy? I pulled myself together. These longings for simpler tastes frightened me. I must not lose my mental balance.

"Come," I said, drawing a chair up to the fire, "we mustn't let this quite unman us."

Crichton Rigby raised his dull eyes from the fire, and finished his whisky with a long sigh.

"Oh, it's no blow to me," he said cheerlessly; "I only feel it on your account. I felt it was beyond my means. I never saw anything like the stones in the eyes; and did you notice the green jade of the creature's hands and feet?"

"And the stone in the forehead," I answered. "Yes, it's I who am unfortunate to-day. But you—tell me something about yourself. How did the Archæological field-day go off?"

"I read my paper in Monken Batsford

Church," said Rigby solemnly. "I give you my word, to three people, and Reece F.S.A., who was the third, was asleep in the churchwarden's pew."

"And the other two," I said idly.

"The other two were young Gosling of Somerset House, and the girl he's engaged to, a very sensible young woman. They were in the organ-loft, and could hear me capitally, they said."

"How about the barrows?" I asked. The green stone of Durgâ was burning between two black lumps of coal.

"I have an urn and two spear-heads," he returned in a lower tone. "You need not mention it, but those idiots knocked off digging for lunch, and while they were gorging and stuffing, old Reece prosing on with his mouth full, I took another turn with the spade and put these things in my pocket. There wasn't much else of interest. The urn is in my great coat there."

"They won't have much to show at their conversazione then," I said. "I've got a card for it somewhere here." I rummaged among my letters. In the excitement of the time, they were lying still unopened on the table.

Topping the heap was a fierce-looking business missive. The embossed stamp

on the back was "Goode, Evans & Co., Angel Court," and when I read that, I felt somewhat nervous.

Three months ago, the suit of Maximilian armour, now in the corner of my room, fell to me, at what any expert would testify to be an exceedingly moderate price. But that moderate price was yet a large sum of money, and that large sum of money was drawn from my capital, and ought to have been replaced by some means.

After debating for a while whether I should sell my "Wood Nymph" by Titian, I finally decided to make the money on the Stock Exchange; and I placed the matter in the hands of the firm mentioned, by the advice of a young friend at my club, who told me he had once won no less than twenty-six pounds by the mere alteration in price of the shares of a goldmine.

The office was in Angel Court, a narrow little turning out of Throgmorton Street, entered through an archway, at the corner of which members of the Stock Exchange were always hastily devouring Jaffa oranges from the baskets of a hawker. When I say I placed the matter in the hands of Goode, Evans and Co., I say so advisedly. My poor father always said, "Leave your business affairs in the hands of those who

are competent to arrange them," and I could see at a glance that the elder Mr. Goode, a white-haired man of courteous manners, was thoroughly conversant with the minutiae of financial business. The details of our arrangements would be uninteresting to the reader, and have indeed escaped my memory.

Two days before, a letter had come to me, followed by two telegrams desiring my instant attendance in the City; but I was so fully occupied in correcting the proofs of my pamphlet on the alleged Lincolnshire origin of Wat Tyler, that I could not spare the time. I now think it would have been better to have done so, for here was a letter from Mr. Goode, stating that he had been forced to close my account, and demanding a cheque for a difference that could barely be met by my remaining Consols, even when supplemented by my balance at Coutts's.

This blow, following upon the morning's misfortune, quite crushed me. I turned to Rigby, saying, "I am a broken man."

He replied, gazing at the fire and still nursing his knee in his hands, "Speccott, it was a wonderful specimen, and it is a painful thing; but don't let it unman you."

For that evening, I felt that sympathetic attention was not his to give.

CHAPTER II.

A SLIGHT visitation of the influenza prevented me for a time from realising business details. On the night of the fourth day, having written what was, humanly speaking, my last cheque, I sat alone among my collection, rubbing the Italian morion on my knees with chamois leather, and feeling that while these treasures were left me, the bolts of fate might hail upon me in vain. I suppose few men of my income have bought so well or so judiciously. I was in a haze of tobacco smoke and resignation, when two ugly thoughts rose within me.

In front of my seat was a substantial oak bracket. I had bought that bracket to support an idol it would never know.

And as I turned from it to contemplate the collection, I knew with sudden shock that I should have to live on that, and I recalled the tales of siege mothers who ate their babies. So, one by one, these cherished children of mine would

fall by the cruel hammer. Old Reece would thrust himself into the society of my "Wood Nymph" by Titian; a cheque from Thorpe-Tomlinson would lead my Gubbio ware to exile in sloppy Lincolnshire; my matchless armour would face the hat-stand in the hall of some West Kensington banker.

For a moment, I thought of perishing together, of blowing myself and my collection into the air; but you cannot do these things in a flat.

That night, I slept heavily, as one does under sentence of death; but after about three hours I woke, and the darkness was thick with despair that deepened with the coming of dawn. When morning broke, to the chorus of a full choir of sparrows, I huddled on my clothes and went out. I do not think any spell of suicide was upon me, but I went towards the Serpentine and I did not take my latch-key.

The streets were swept and garnished by a shower, just ended. I passed no one but the policeman, who looked at me suspiciously, following for three street lengths, and only turning back at the end of his beat. I walked through street after drowsy street of drawn blinds and decorous houses, whose happy inmates were safe from the stings of misfortune. Fate cannot harm

those who have no collections to lose.

I walked on to escape my bitter thoughts, till the morning milk and a thickening stream of early workmen varied the monotony of the police and the pavement. I put my pipe in my teeth, and searched my pockets for a pouch which was not there.

My wanderings had brought me near a little tobacco shop, to the northward of Leicester Square, where I had bought tobacco for years past, and I strolled up to see if the door were open.

It was not yet open, nor would it be that day, for the shutters were up, and over them, a board—"To Let." A litter of straw round the door showed that it had not long been empty.

"Just my luck," I muttered, and was turning away, when the idea of my life occurred to me, and I stood still in act to turn.

I stood still, looking at the outside of the little shop. The inside I knew well enough; the small front shop with a largish parlour behind it.

I stood there long pondering, and when I did turn away, I walked with the energy of new hope to Crichton Rigby's.

His rooms were in a dull street in Bloomsbury, two rooms so crammed, that I often wondered how he found room for himself and his servant. The servant, indeed,

was so well put away that I had never set eyes on him.

I found Rigby at breakfast. He was an early riser, and managed to put in a good day among his things (a very poor lot, by the way) before going to the War Office. He received me on this occasion with sad cordiality.

"You're looking quite pulled down," he said; "I've been wanting to see you. I've seen Levinsohn. He says he bought that Indian image for Lord Peebles, so we shall never see it again. They say he knows more about Eastern traps than anyone else, and if *he* thought it worth buying——"

"Yes," I said, sitting down, "that only confirms my first impression. But I have another little matter to mention. I am ruined, Rigby." He looked up, and I added, "Stock Exchange."

"Oh lor!" groaned Rigby, "then you couldn't have had it, even if it had been knocked down to you. But cheer up, old man! What are you going to do?"

When I mentioned that I was forced to part with my collection, his face cleared wonderfully.

"You can't think how this distresses me, old fellow," he said. "Dear, dear—but don't throw it away on a gross public—a friend who sympathises with you and

who knows the pieces, you'll let me go through it before you put it up? This is very distressing indeed."

"It is not my intention," I said, "to sacrifice it to the gross public in the lump; nor, at present, to sympathetic friends in detail. Rigby, I am not quite ruined. I have an idea."

As I spoke, I gently removed the coin which he was cleaning with something gritty on a toothbrush. "Rigby," I continued, "does it not occur to you that a man, inheriting, as doubtless I do from my poor father, the business instincts of the British merchant which have made commercial England what it is, and with a technical knowledge of antiquities—"

"Unsurpassed," said Rigby.

"Save by yours," I bowed. Rigby is the merest *dilettante*, but I as a potential tradesman, knew what was due to him as a member of the purchasing public. Even while I handed him the muffin, I stifled with difficulty some folly about "the next article."

"Does it occur to you," I went on, "that with these advantages, I might do worse than open Ionides' cigar-shop, with the collection as stock-in-trade?"

Rigby opened his little eyes until they were as round as pennies.

"I believe," he said kindly, "there's a

Duchess who has a bonnet-shop somewhere."

"It isn't that I look at; but would it pay?"

"Oh, yes," he replied. "You'll sell deliberately instead of quickly—much more convenient, much."

I decided at once, that not at starvation point would I quote any but prohibitive prices in Rigby's hearing. "Well," I said, "there's no one I could trust but you. Come round and have a look at the place." And we went out arm-in-arm.

CHAPTER III.

WITHIN an eventful week, I had interviewed the landlord, taken the premises, and seen my chattels pass, almost unscathed, through a pantehnicon into a charming little shop, above whose window, the name Ionides had been replaced by SPECCOTT, in noble Albrecht Dürer capitals.

Rigby, with friendly enthusiasm, took a week's leave from his Department and offered his aid. During that week, we seemed to eat and sleep on packing cases; cotton waste and straw packing entering into all the details of our life, especially at meal-time.

Crichton Rigby proved invaluable. He found a tenant for my chambers in his cousin, an impressionist artist, who moved in at once, and painted them yellow.

He shone as a paperhanger and decorator, and attained a certain eminence by his manipulation of a hammer and nails. Under cover of enquiring the price of some object, he visited all the Wardour

Street and Bond Street dealers, noting their arrangement of stock and details of the conduct of business.

More than this, he found me Ambrose, a grave lad of sixteen years, and four feet in height, who, upon a sunny Monday morning, removed my shutters in a really masterly way, exposing my collection for the first time to the gaze of a discriminating public.

The shutters being taken away, showed me standing with a bland and encouraging smile in the midst of my treasures, which filled the shop and the room behind, and even overflowed into the little room above on the first floor back.

It was such a shop as in the old days I should never have had heart to pass. China in the window—china, drinking-cups, miniatures, ivories, locks, stilettoes, and hunting horns. My fifteenth-century psalter (open at "Miserere Mei" with a telling illumination of David and Bathsheba), enamels, spurs, crucifixes, thumbscrews, and a variety of other joyous and delightful objects.

In the shop and back shop—benches, dower-chests, clocks and tables; early Italian cope and mitre, carved wooden stall heads (picked up during a Devonshire church restoration), helmets, and gauntlets,

and a genuine specimen of parish stocks. In the corners were piled sheaves of partisans and halberds, brown bills and morgensterns, arquebuses, crossbows and musketoons.

The room above, approached by a stairway from the shop, hung with my Flemish tapestry representing the Garden of Love, held my collection of books, a little very choice China and Venetian glass in a cabinet, and my beautiful suit of Maximilian armour complete in every detail, a most lasting joy. Also Crichton Rigby, rubbing his hands and rumpling his hair with his fingers.

The first man to enter the shop was a stray School Board Inspector, who enquired why Ambrose was not sent to school. I called up Ambrose, whose replies satisfied him that he had indeed penetrated the inner labyrinths of Board School standards, and the inspector apologised handsomely and went away.

Him followed many foolish *flâneurs* who priced various articles, receiving my replies with a vacant look at some remote object, and the expression "Ah!" succeeded by withdrawal.

My next-door neighbour sent in to ask change for a five-pound note; and I opened business by selling a Lowestoft cup

and saucer to Rigby for three-and-ten-pence.

Rigby was leaving with his purchase for the War Office, when a four-wheeler drew up at my door, and he turned aside, examining a Sussex iron fire-dog with minute attention.

The cab-door opened, and a tall man in respectable black, stepped out and staggered into the shop, embracing a heavy brown paper parcel. He glanced from Rigby to me, saying, "Mr. Speccott?"

I bowed. "His Lordship, sir," he said, rapidly tearing off the brown paper, "has seen your advertisement in the *Athenæum*, and, knowing you by reputation, will place this valuable object in your hands—with a view to sale." A layer of sackcloth was removed.

"His Lordship?" I said.

"The Yearl o' Peebles," he returned, and, pulling off a wrapping of old yellow silk, he exhibited to the excited Rigby and myself—the jade feet, the golden body and the green, shining forehead of the goddess Durgâ.

"Eh, sirs, saw ye ever siccan a carven and graven papistrie?" said her unmoved custodian. "And now, ye'll be givin' me a bit receipt."

CHAPTER IV.

I HAD passed a week in the shop, a wet, dull week with constant showers from a slate-coloured sky. The heaviest downpour delivered an American tourist into my hands, with a drenched overcoat and a split umbrella. I sheltered him until the tyranny of the elements was overpast, and he went back to the Langham, laden with many purchases, accompanied by Ambrose bearing forty Dutch tiles and a pair of brass candlesticks.

At the end of that week, Rigby came to supper. I had closed the shop at eight, despairing of further custom for the day, and we sat together in the little room up the stairs, over the embers of the fire.

Rigby was unusually excited, talking loudly and full of anecdote. We had visited the back shop with a candle, and looked up together at the shining stone in the Idol's forehead, blinking angrily in the candlelight. I had told Rigby of the safe I had hired for its custody, which was to arrive on Monday;

but for once he seemed to avoid talking of the Idol. Possibly, its unholy grin from the dark corner made him desirous of changing the subject.

He was saying, "and so Mullion said, 'The work over this Norman doorway, so clearly and firmly cut, betrays to my mind the loving hand of the great craftsman, possibly the master-workman of the old masons.' And I said, 'Does it,' (Y'know that was the place where the Dean and Chapter had been at their restoration tricks last year.) And so I said, 'Mullion—' What is it, old fellow?"

"I fancied I heard some one stir below."

"Worst of these old mouse-eaten Georgian houses," murmured Rigby. "Now let's overhaul that armour; I've never looked at it thoroughly."

He put on the helmet and struggled with beaver and chin-piece until his gold eye-glasses sparkled through the opening. I never saw anything less chivalric than Rigby.

He took it off and induced me to demonstrate the working of the rivets and buckles. With his assistance I gradually sheathed myself in the entire suit. It must have been forged for a man of five feet six, which is precisely my height, but was curiously cramped in the propor-

tions of the waist. Rigby was crowning his work with the helmet, when I distinctly heard at the foot of the stair, the noise of falling crockery, followed by the sustained ringing noise that a spinning plate makes when settling down.

"Somebody's breaking in," I shouted from the depths of the helmet that Rigby's fingers were locking securely to my shoulders. "Go down, Rigby, for God's sake! Think of the Durgâ. Nothing's insured."

But Rigby, who is as deaf as an owl, fastened the last clasp, and asseverated that he heard nothing.

I pushed up the beaver to listen.

"There," said Rigby, shuffling his feet nervously; "not a sound, still as the grave, silent as death; quiet of the tomb, my dear Speccott."

Through his voice, which rose louder and louder, I caught a crash of falling objects.

"Don't go down!" shrieked Rigby; "they'll murder you." Glancing down at my steel-clad legs, the idea seemed humorous.

I tore myself from his detaining grasp, as a rush of feet below confirmed my worst suspicions, and with my harness on my back plunged headlong into the front shop.

Scared by the crash of my descent, a man who had already reached the front door, turned his face, a brown one, over his shoulder and then fled. I looked instinctively for the glimmer of the Idol's forehead. It had disappeared!

At that supreme moment of bereavement I did not bestow a look upon the fragments of majolica at my feet. I positively screamed to Rigby, "Wake Ambrose! mind the shop!" and grabbing a partisan from the corner I rushed massively after the thief.

Handicapped though he was by his burden, I was only in time to see him disappear round the corner.

I pursued him, my clanking steps resounding upon the wet pavement. The distance between us remained the same. I calculated that the weight of Durgâ, the goddess, must be much the same as my panoply, but she did not cling to the legs of her Paris as my inopportune ironmongery did to mine.

My first spurt of running over, the aggressive tightness of my belt asserted itself, and I lifted my feet in their huge solerets with increasing discomfort. I pursued the thief through some half-dozen streets, only to lose him in one of the alleys fringing the back of the London Pavilion; but I toiled on, hoping against

hope, until even a laboured walk could no longer be sustained.

"Thank God, it's wet," I said, as I stumbled into an archway to struggle with my belt, "or I should have been mobbed before this."

The perspiration had hardly room to run between my person and my case, as I strove with gauntleted fingers that were all trembling thumbs, to unfasten something—anything.

I put the case to myself as a conundrum. "In what," I said, while my efforts were swelling the veins of my forehead and ears, "In what lies the difference between Rosherville Gardens and a suit of Maximilian plate armour?" I put the question sternly to my partisan which leaned against the wall beside me.

"Because," I answered hotly from within my shells, "because *this* is pre-eminently *not* the place to spend a happy day."

I paused. From the opposite pavement two men were regarding me attentively.

They were clad in black Inverness capes, and in one's case a hat appeared to be lacking.

The hatless man, leaning upon the other for support, said, "For God's sake! *do* you see a man in armour over the way?"

His companion was apparently of sterner

stuff. I was carefully inspected through an unsteady eye-glass, whose owner said reassuringly—

"Hold up, old fellow. So do I. Lor' Mayorshow, you know, or meet him and twenty more like him walking up the Strand to-morrow. 'Have you used?' you know, or revival of Richard III. at Lyceum."

Seeing I had naught to fear from these, I incautiously quitted my shelter. A pale London child, of the type that never goes to bed, gathered up the half-brick and three whelk shells with which it had been disporting itself on the kerb-stone, and fled, shrieking dismally.

"What yer doin' to the child?"

I turned upon the policeman who spoke. The light of his lantern flashed luridly on my habiliments, and he fell back a pace.

We were at a street corner, and, despite the inconvenience of my corselet, my heart bounded to recognise that corner, knowing that twelve paces on would bring me to the door of SPECCOTT, Dealer in curiosities and Works of Art.

I was saying rather sternly: "Officer, I am in pursuit of my lost idol, a goddess stolen from me," when it occurred to me that we were at unnecessarily close quarters. An interested crowd had already

formed round us, though I swear the street was empty when I began to speak. I tried to edge back, when the policeman replied:—

"Stole off; ah, I should think any respectable young woman 'ud steal off. What have you got on you?"

And the delighted crowd shrieked in unison, "Where did you git that 'at?"

"If you could do your duty by dispersing this crowd, there might be some chance of my getting them off."

The crowd superfluously pointed out that I had them all on, a banal phrase which seemed to please.

The policeman was unaccountably annoyed by my request.

"Not here you don't," he said, and the crowd laughed insultingly.

Incensed by his behaviour, I fumbled angrily and hopelessly among my fluted and enriched skirts for the means of taking his number. The crowd gained strength and interest every moment, reinforced by the emptying theatres and music-halls.

"I don't want to—*here*," I said, abandoning the pencil. We had swayed towards the lamp at the corner, and the road to Rome lay, figuratively speaking, on that same pavement. I positively shrieked:

"I want to go home, I am a respectable tradesman. Let me go!"

"Just now, it was your girl you wanted. What's that you're carrying in your 'and, anyway? Do you want to run a spike into 'er when you've followed 'er up—eh?"

The chorus struck in excitedly, "They've got 'im! Capcher o' Jack the Ripper!" a cry which added considerably to its numbers.

"That," I said with dignity, "is a partisan with a head of pierced work, and—"

"Well," returned one of the three policemen into whom my interlocutor had resolved himself; "I don't know so much about that. I should say it was a weapon, within the meaning of the Act. You'd better come quietly, and tell this to the magistrate on Monday, without poking out no one's eyes with that!"

Beyond the second gas-lamp I read the word "Speccott" in glistening paint.

"Stand back!" I said, moving my steel-clad elbows with vigour, "*I will pass!*" The crowd divided, but a large policeman planted himself in my way. Maddened by the interruption, I couched my partisan and charged heavily. He stepped aside with an agility wonderful in a man of his weight, and struck me in a most uncalled-for and brutal manner with his truncheon.

How I longed to be mounted in a manner befitting my equipment. At that moment, it would have been a positive gratification to have charged through the serried ranks of the B division, and cloven its superintendent from helmet to chin-strap. As it was, I fell upon the greasy, sloppy pavement with a resounding clatter.

We had a noisy scuffle, and I clung to my own door-scraper with stiff fingers. Their superior numbers, and possibly their ability to bend their joints, prevailed.

I will not dwell upon the indignity they thrust upon me. Suffice it to say that, bound to a species of open litter, I was borne by seven policemen and a private in the Foot Guards towards the nearest police-station.

We passed in under the lamp. More police threw themselves in front of the crowd, and their shouts of "Pass along, here! *pass* along!" died away with the deriding yells of the crowd, who offered to go home and fetch me a "sardine-opener"—for what purpose I cannot conceive.

I was hustled into a little enclosed corner, and a rail slammed in front. A man with a book and pen, who was the first person entirely unmoved by my situation, listened to the statement of the tall police-

man, who perjured himself with all an expert's grace saying that I was *drunk and disorderly*, and creating a disturbance. I—Dudley Speccott! In turn he heard my simple tale, which he reduced to a minute of few and compromising words.

An official attempt to search my pockets met with little success. They took my partisan away, gingerly, as though suspecting loading, and they locked me in a cell.

There was a plank bench, sloping towards the wall to prevent the uneasy slumberer's rolling off towards the floor. A gas-lamp in the passage lighted me. I gasped in my armour—my struggles with the defenders of the civic peace had loosened my helmet. An hour's earnest struggle with the stiffened straps got it off. A magnificently concerted effort of lungs and diaphragm loosened something at my waist. In the delicious relief that followed, I slept.

CHAPTER V.

I SAW it all. I awakened in the raw, grey dusk, and in the long morning watch that followed, the true inwardness of my loss was unfolded to me.

I had read my "Moonstone" carefully, and by the light of that remarkable work I knew how to construe the incident of the brown face that turned towards me when the palladium of my shop was borne away.

The brown face, and brown hands closed on the image of Durgâ the goddess, were those of the priest of Durgâ, a blood-thirsty fanatic, risking life and caste, and such inconveniences as attach to a P. and O. voyage, to recover his sacred charge—to restore the glimmering green stone to the eyes of the devotees who awaited him round some dark shrine, under the domes and pinnacles of a far-off Indian city. That they should continue to await him was my instantaneous resolve.

The meed of the man who stayed his way

might be a dagger thrust, but my resolve to plant him in the dock of the Old Bailey was unshaken by the thought. After my recent experiences I felt careless of the lives of the police.

The day was Sunday, so I had all that day for laying my plans of action, but I felt acutely the start it afforded the Brahmin. During the afternoon, I extricated myself from my gauntlets, and was permitted to send news of my sad case to Rigby, urging him to hasten with bail.

The messenger found him absent from his rooms, and another message sent to the shop brought the intelligence that the place was shut.

In my despair, I wrote an appealing note to old Reece, F.S.A., and *he* was dining somewhere at Twickenham.

After that, I settled myself to spend the remainder of the day of rest on my plank, and crowned a succession of twenty-minute dozes with a long and dreamless sleep, lulled by my neighbour in the adjacent cell, who sang "Hi-tiddley-hi-ti" to a monotonous chant all the evening. I was only aroused by the arrival of Monday's breakfast, which in Her Majesty's places of detention is of a *maigre* character.

What followed is dream-like. My intense and growing desire to follow the fate of

my Idol, to wrest her from the bosom of the Brahmin, added to a burning anxiety for disarmament and change of clothes, rendered the police-court but a stuffy and fleeting vision. I stood in the dock holding my helmet and gauntlets, and waited for the end.

The end was soon coming. Old Reece appeared as a witness to my character, and at any other time it might have vexed me a little to hear that foolish old man more than hinting to the magistrate that I was not drunk, but was a person of feeble intellect, as evinced by the preposterous date I had assigned to an ancient British silver coin now in his collection.

I was vaguely glad to see the magistrate put this absurdity aside. He said he preferred to regard it as an ordinary case of drunkenness, and having in view the fact that I had been in custody thirty-six hours, he would discharge me, cautioned.

There was tremendous excitement in court, I believe. I idly noted the reporters hard at it, and I fancy from the way in which the public moved back to let me pass that they shared Reece's idiot view of the matter. But what they thought was nothing to me. When I got outside, I said to the man who led me in and out:

"Look here, I must be got away from

this. I've money in my pocket, if I could get at it."

He called a cab for me at once, saying:

"I seed you was a gentleman the minute I set eyes on you."

I gave him my address and told the cabman to drive to the nearest working ironmonger. He put the partisan on the roof and touched his cap as we drove off.

Anything a little unusual destroys the reliance of the British mechanic. The ironmonger was open-mouthed. Very slowly, and with the sweat of our brows, I was got out. He shelled me as an unskilful amateur shells a shrimp.

I stretched my legs at last in his dingy back shop. The plates lay about my feet. And my heart leaped up, knowing that I was free to pursue my desperate adventure—to court the various and ingenious dooms which lie in wait for him who interferes with the sacred and mysterious.

"Thank them as be *that's* done!" said the ironmonger breathlessly, wiping his forehead with his arm, "and if you'll take my advice, sir, you steer clear o' that sorter lark for the future. For the end of a lark it is the beak, as they say, and it was a niggly job."

I felt that it was, signifying my agreement by making it five shillings. In the

lavish expenditure of string on the neatly-tied, brown paper parcels of armour, I traced his appreciation of my additional half-crown.

With the brown paper parcels and another cab I hurried home. Ambrose was at the door—torpid, but faithful. I roused him, and asked him had anything happened.

"No, sir—nothing. Mr. Rigby he follered you out, and I thought I'd better wait. I didn't quite know what to do, sir, but I thought I'd better wait."

I bade him watch and ward till my return. For all I knew this might be never, for it now occurred to me that unless Durgâ came home to roost, my business was at an end.

CHAPTER VI.

DESDEMONA was the only person who ever really cared for traveller's tales, and she lived to regret her *penchant*. But I had a tale to tell, and I thought I knew Rigby well enough to make him play Wedding Guest to my Ancient Mariner.

Burning to pour out my moving accidents, to ask him what the dickens became of him on Saturday and Sunday, and to charm him with my theory about the Brahmin, I called a hansom.

On the way, it occurred to me that Rigby might as well share the dangers of the chase. I remembered that he always professed a slight interest in Durgâ, and his was the leisure of a Civil Servant. What better aid could I have?

"Go sharp!" I shouted through the trap, and the cabman made a feint of whipping up his horse. I turned to the little oblong mirrors, and wondered at the incompetence of a magistracy that could believe the owner of that pale, interesting face a drunkard.

At Rigby's, I leapt out, telling the cabman to wait. It struck me that if Rigby were at home, it would be a businesslike thing to drive at once to the docks and inspect the outward-bound vessels.

Rigby was on the third floor. I climbed to that height, and announced my arrival with taps.

No one replied, but the handle turned in my grasp, and I entered an untenanted room.

Breakfast was on the table untouched, so I knew he must be in, and I passed to the inner door. The desire to relate my adventures paled before my growing determination to start on my man-hunt.

I laid hold of the handle of the inner door and walked in.

"Rigby," I said, "prepare yourself for a shock." If I had asked him to prepare *me*, it would have been more to the purpose.

I wish to be particular in describing the shocking spectacle in the bedroom.

Rigby was seated in an adoring attitude before his washstand. On the slab of the washstand was the inverted basin, and upon that pedestal, basking in the one ray of morning sun that ever penetrated that well-like chamber, was the golden-

gleaming image, the Goddess Durgâ with the green stone in the forehead.

Polishing a boot in the hutch of a dressing-room was a "native" servant. The hands that swayed the polishing-brush were the brown hands that had borne off my Goddess.

This time I really did see it all.

Rigby looked up from his devotions on the camp-stool with lack-lustre eyes. He made a distracted effort to conceal the object with a bath-towel, feebly ejaculated "I say," and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You see I've got it safely," was the remark he hazarded after a long and painful silence.

"I thought I had better take charge of it while you went for your little run," he went on.

Worn out by my sojourn in the armour, and quite overcome by the shock, I sat down on the camp-stool.

"Rigby," I said severely, "my little run was, you will recollect, in pursuit of your Thug over there, who had burgled the Idol while you inveigled me into the armour and fastened me in."

He hung his head; the situation admitted of no explanation. It certainly admitted of none of the sixteen which Rigby's

conscience supplied me with in the next ten minutes.

I addressed him again; I said: "Rigby, you have done your best to ruin an honest tradesman. I came here from a felon's dock, I passed the night in a felon's cell and a suit of plate armour. I have a cold in my head, and your statements are false. What reparation do you propose to make for the anguish of mind and body you have subjected me to?"

He looked up, shuffling his slippered feet, and said brightly, "Let me help you take it back in the cab."

We drove back silently, with the Idol on Rigby's knee. When my American customer came from the Langham and drove away in his turn with the Idol, my commission on his cheque more than consoled me for the loss of its society.

Perhaps, I am unduly sensitive in such matters, but somehow I cannot help attributing a certain uneasiness in Rigby's manner to his knowledge of the fact that I have found him out to be a liar and a felon.

AN ANNIVERSARY AT THE "HARE AND BILLET"

CHAPTER I.

SEVENTEEN hundred and seventy. Christmas Eve, past nine o'clock, and a bitter night.

It was raining as it had rained all day; a gathering wind lashed the hedgerows and the shrieking boughs of the naked elms, and there was sleet in the wind.

For his own reasons Mr. George Masters was avoiding the highway, preferring instead to plunge in the darkness across the fields, falling again and again in the ruts of sandy mud ridged with last week's snow, grey and sodden. He cursed through chattering teeth, as he made for the far, twinkling light of the "Hare and Billet."

Pretty luck this for a man—on Christmas Eve, too! He had spent the grey, gloomy afternoon lying among the soaked gorse by the road-edge, with the sleet in his ears, and the steady rain winning through the shag-coat and the greasy brown coat beneath it, to the flannel waistcoat that sheltered his pistols.

Chilled to the soul, with no dry thread on him, he had waited faithfully till Squire Hales's horse-hoofs splashed the mud over the gorse bushes, and then the numbed fingertips crept under the flannel waistcoat. He half rose among the furze as the red roquelaure went past him, to the plash of the hoofs and the jangle of the bridle-reins.

But when he saw the two servants turn the corner with holsters before them, he sank back into his wet nest, a prey to natural annoyance.

The horses went on towards Shooter's Hill, and a dripping figure stood in the way they had come, shaking a helpless fist and cursing all things below the beetling sky. Then George Masters tramped across the strip of furze-clad common and flung himself through a gap in the hedge of the turnip-field. He broke into a heavy run when he saw the light from the kitchen of the "Hare and Billet" blinking before him.

As he skirted the stack-yard, a stout, pale-faced man, who had been crouching under the lee of a rick, staggered to his feet and whistled gently.

The unfortunate footpad unhasped the gate, and stepped forward to stand with the host of the "Hare and Billet" in one gathering puddle.

"Gone by," said Mr. Masters, bitterly, "gone by—to Greenwich by this time, likely—with his two bloody-minded serving men behind him—a cowardly, white-livered, gold-laced hound."

"You're wet, George," said the landlord—"come you in under a roof." Reproof of George's bitterness of speech was in the tone—the tone of a man who had his own disappointments to contend with.

"And no straw-loft for me this night, mind you!" returned his guest, shaking himself morosely, "a seat by the fire with a can of hotted ale, if I swing and you swing together for it, Tom Cowling."

"Come in, then," said Mr. Cowling reluctantly, "Hales's shepherd was the only man in the house this day, and he hath had his drink and gone home with it, this hour ago."

They came up the bricked path to the back door and passed in under the lean-to roof of the shed. It was quite dark, and they moved shuffling amongst the barrels of beer, the firewood and farm tools that covered the earth floor. The landlord raised the heavy wooden latch of the door leading to the house, and they passed up the two steps into the big room, kitchen and taproom in one—and shut out the night and the cold.

CHAPTER II.

A PLEASANT kitchen with tiled floor and a comforting mass of red coals glowing in an iron basket sticking out of the wall. A kitchen with blackened settles, long benches and tables ringed with many ale-cans.

A quiet kitchen where only one man was, and he, the hostler, in the big arm-chair asleep.

The landlord roused him with his foot, and he sat up, rubbing a beery eye with a chilblained fist.

"Mr. George is coming in here to sleep to-night, Bill," said the landlord. "I take it his Majesty the King won't trouble a poor fellow a Christmas Eve. Hot him some ale, a quart of ale, and spread his coat over that chair-back—main wet and main dry, Mr. George be, I take it."

"He'll sleep in his chair, then," returned the hostler. "There's a man above us now, in the bed, a real gentleman he is, with his sword and his rooklay—come in when

you was out, when the heavy rain come on. I showed him up to the bedroom and kindled the fire, and he lies there, burning two of the big wax candles; and if he don't drink the bottle of claret, it's opened, and will have to be paid for, too. Terry don't like him, Terry don't; hear to him howling—he'th whined like that ever sin' the old gentleman come. Hark to 'un again, now the wind's quiet."

The mongrel fastened by the front door was baying howl upon howl. A kick at the panel, and a command to "lie down" from the landlord, appeared to soothe him for the moment, but the long whines soon broke out again.

"So 'ee haven't met Squire, then," grinned the hostler, stirring the coals and thrusting into the red gap a battered copper cone which he had been filling from a great jug of yellow stoneware.

The footpad had thrown himself back among the red cushions of the high chair, and his worsted-clad feet, thrust out towards the blaze, were steaming freely.

"Met him!" he repeated, indignation struggling with a rapidly developing cold in the head, "Ay—met him, and see him go a-riding by, and now he'll be sitting with his friends, and his luxury, and his port wine, and not giving a thought to a

poor man he left a-laying on wet furze that——”

“Never mind Squire, Master George,” said the landlord of the “Hare and Billet,” “there’s more fish in the sea for thee, belike, than Squire Hales. Better be here with thy toes to the fire, than stay out in the rain like Jimmy Copshaw, poor fellow, kicking his heels in the chains on Shooter’s Hill. Just by the ditch where they found Farmer Cooper, they’ve put the poor lad, they have—I see’d him when I come by from Woolwich.”

“And never mind Jimmy Copshaw,” retorted the other. “Better men than him’ll have to die off their feet: and take up the ale, will’ee, the cold’s in my vitals now.”

The landlord shuffled up to the fire, and took the copper pot from among the coals.

The white foam came suddenly up to the edge, as he poured it hissing into a brown mug.

“Copshaw,” said the landlord, surveying the empty cone he was replenishing from the jug, as it were some curious relic, “Copshaw’s last beer on earth (‘less it were St. Giles’ bowl) was a-hotted in that pot, the night afore he was took in the ‘Greyhound’ skittle alley at Eltham.”

“If he has any beer where he is now, it won’t want hottin’—for sure,” the hostler chuckled hoarsely, lifting his shock head from the bench.

Mr. Masters leaned forward to take the mug from his host’s hand, and drank. Mr. Masters was not a graceful drinker, even when he did not burn his mouth; when he did, his appearance caught even the eye of the landlord, who stared fixedly.

“Us have had our bellyful of Copshaw, to my thinking; and what are you looking at me like that for, anyhow—like as if I was a Michaelmas goose you was fattin’?” Mr. Masters roared the question in sudden rage.

“Why, George,” the landlord began deprecatingly, but the other set down the mug with a heavy hand, rose, and leaned threateningly across the table.

“Why, George, indeed!” went on George, thickly: “and if you *will* go on talking o’ Copshaw”—which the other had shown no signs of doing—“if you will go on talking o’ Copshaw, I shouldn’t mind knowin’—just out o’ curiosity—who ’twas as give Copshaw to the Nabs? And I’m not at all sure as I don’t know, neither.”

The cropped head and angry red face of the footpad were thrust nearer and

nearer the face of his host, who betook himself conversationally to bay.

"Come, George," he said, firmly, "none o' that guise talk in the 'Hare.' Copshaw, he went about with the drink in him, and when the drink's in, the secret's out, as they say! and so his Majesty come one fine day and took him. You ain't the man, George, though I says it of you, to go braggin' about—say, of how you flashed the barkers harmless at the hightobyman's face as took the mails when you was guard o' the Chatham Fly, and was drunk with him here up in my straw-loft for three days afterwards."

"I should think not," said George, a little mollified at this pleasant recollection of an exploit.

"Nor how you put your knife in—"

"Enough said," said George anxiously, with a glance at the stairs which led straight from the kitchen to the upper floor. "His Majesty King George ain't as deaf as you seem to think. How do you know that that shycock in the bedroom is deaf either?"

"He's dumb, anyway," the hostler put in, who had eagerly followed the conversation of his heroes with admiration and enthusiasm beaming from his rather foolish blue eyes.

"Let's hope so," said Mr. Masters. "Shall us creep up and see?"

"Not yet," said the landlord, and there was something in his tone which induced a moment's complete silence. No sound came to break it from the room overhead, but the dog without strained at his collar and howled afresh.

"Like as though," said the hostler, crouching into his settle corner, "like as though he was a-seeing *Them*."

CHAPTER III.

THE long evening watch passed on. The dog wailed to the wind, which answered with fierce gusts of passion, and hurtling of sleet against the lattice panes. When the dog was silent for a while and the wind paused to gather itself for new effort, the rain pattered gently, the clock ticked to the chorus of a choir of crickets—and East Wickham's belfry jangled in the distance.

The men in the kitchen were sitting in the shadow of an idea.

"He don't seem to be moving," said the hostler breaking the silence. "He's not awake now, for sure."

The others looked at him with sudden interest, as if the presence upstairs had passed from their thoughts.

"There's a purse above stairs, I make no doubt, and a gold sneezin' box up there, as'll keep awake, if they've any sense." Bill went on, grinning at the subtlety and success of his conversation, but not looking at his companions.

"There's something I don't like, Wil-

lum," Mr. Masters remarked, "about old gentlemen's purses."

"I wouldn't like," put in the landlord, apparently addressing a pewter measure, "an ole gentleman to lose his purse here. Gives the house a bad name—that sort of thing—and a good name," he continued, facing his subordinate, "a good name to a house of entertainment, is better than rubies."

Having delivered himself of this sentiment, he spread his hands over the arms of his Windsor chair and leaned forward with an air of awaiting suggestions. But none came.

He coughed, looked at Mr. Masters and went on. "There was a dear old gentleman come here, let me see, why it was as near as possible a year ago."

"It was a year ago," put in George, "and you was plucking the goose when he come."

"Well, he come here (I'll have to go out and kick that dog) and 'Is this the Deptford Road,' he says, 'my men?' and you says, 'Matter o' twenty mile, master, and a bad road for a lonely traveller to leave a comfortable public behind on.' And he says, 'My horse is at the gatepost and he'd be better in the stable,' and he walks in and orders candles and supper."

"Did he have them?" asked the hostler, breathlessly.

"He had all he ordered, and more," said the landlord, slowly, "but he went on that night, after all."

He looked at his companion; appreciated the reminiscence in the eye of George, the childlike admiration for superior achievement in that of Bill, and pursued:

"Yes," he went on, "an' when he went, he left his gold watch and sneezin' box, and nineteen guineas in a red silk bag. He didn't want 'em where he was going."

"Where was that?"

"Don't I tell you? Deptford."

They all laughed gaily, and the landlord took out a stone bottle and thick glass rummers from the corner cupboard.

"His Majesty King George, wot you're so fond of—here's his health, and our gracious Queen Charlotte, and long to reign over us!" George gave the toast, and they drained their glasses.

"Giniver!" said the hostler, and added tentatively, "A man could do anything wot's drunk Giniver."

"Anything short of murder, he could," assented George. "But it's nothing short o' murder would do for that dog o' yours, Tom."

Indeed, the dog's long-drawn howls still disturbed their Christmas festivities. Moved

by this incongruity, the landlord went out and kicked it.

A gust of wind and rain found way into the room, and Mr. Masters coughed again violently, and shivered and swore.

"Can't you shut the door?" he asked, "this ain't no weather for a poor man with his living to get, and his pockets as empty as the day he was born."

"Well," said the landlord, "our pockets was empty enough last Christmas here, afore that ole gentleman called."

And still no sound from the room upstairs.

"There's another purse up there this night," remarked the footpad, "waiting for them as is sportsmen enough to take it, as two bold lads did last Christmas Eve."

The chill wind must have made its entry still felt in the room, for the landlord shivered again, and the footpad wiped the palms of his hands upon his knees.

"And another old man," he said. "I was the man that did it, and I suppose it'll be my job again. That dog howls fit to wake the dead. I don't like this indoors work, with doors and curtains, and stairs a-creaking, and having to wash your hands this weather. I'm a man that earns his living in the open air, I am, where things is straightforward, and no-

thing can't come creeping up behind you without your seeing it."

The landlord suddenly lifted the wooden latch of the inner door, held his candle above his head, and peered into the darkness.

"No one there," he said; "and I could have sworn that minute I heard a breath. I don't like your talk to-night, George. Wake the dead, and washing of your hands indeed; ain't it enough to——"

He stopped abruptly to pour out more spirit.

"Oh, let him talk, master," cried the hostler, "it puts heart into a man, it do—talking over old times."

George chuckled grimly, and when he had drained his glass, he said cheerfully:—

"Ay, that does it. It all comes back to me. It was him as held the light by the door, when I run in; and it was me as—He bled very free, he did, very free."

"Yes, I held the light, though much against my wish, mind you—thank Them as be," said the landlord, regarding his grimy fingers with satisfaction, "thank Them as be, *my* hands is clean."

"They won't be clean long, then. It's me what holds the light to-night," said George firmly, and he took the candle and walked to the foot of the stair.

"Not a sound," he said.

The landlord had risen—the shock-headed man shifted his big shoulder on the bench where he lay, and the expression rose in his face of a terrier awaiting with eager nose the rush from cover of his first rat.

"If," said he, hesitatingly, "if it comes to that, you can both hold the light—sooner than them guineas should get up and ride off in the morning. I know a young man what would as lief hold a bill-hook as a candle any day of the week."

And he looked so savage that the landlord was unaffectedly shocked. But George came back to the table for another dram, and after it had been tendered him, remarked that that young man would not want for a backer. Then he knocked the damp priming out of his pistol on the table edge and filled the pan.

"I'll just listen once again, if so be he's soundly off;" and he disappeared cautiously up the winding stairs, turning back to add, "and don't any of you come creeping up behind me, for I don't like it."

The other two looked anywhere but at each other, without speaking. There was no sound from above after the stairs had ceased to creak under the footpad's weight. Outside the dog howled, a long, low bay-ing that never ceased.

CHAPTER IV.

THE hostler fetched a bill-hook from the lean-to shed and employed the time in taking off his boots. After a glance at the other, he sat down with the bill-hook hidden by his coat-flap.

Both men started at the first creak of the stair.

George stood at the stair-foot, blinking in the sudden light.

"He's a-sleeping like the dead," he whispered. "Can't even hear him breathe. His candles is burning yet; I see them through the key-hole. Come on!"

All three stood together for a moment at the bottom of the stairway. There was a moment's hesitation, while the landlord and Mr. Masters adjusted the procession behind Bill, who had planted his foot on the bottom stair. At this inopportune instant, the tall clock in the corner struck one, with a shrill metallic stroke, and Bill withdrew his foot suddenly, dropping the bill-hook. It fell to the red

tiles of the floor, which gave back clang on clang.

Aghast at this mishap, the host pushed his clumsy-fingered servant back into his place in the corner; Mr. Masters and himself reseating themselves with a hastily assumed appearance of genial domesticity.

But no startled guest appearing on the stairs after ten minutes of complete silence, the procession re-formed in its old order, and went up.

Outside the bedroom door they held their breath and listened—not a sound but the ticking of the clock below, the rushing of the wind without and the moaning plaint of the dog.

A stealthier man than the hostler, the landlord thrust a sleek hand forward to grasp the latch of the door. It was unsecured, and opened a little way under his gentle pressure. Through the foot of opening they could see the two waxen candles flame in the sockets as they burnt by the sleeping man. By their light his legs modelled themselves under the white counterpane. His face—his face and shoulders—were in the deep shadows of the faded green curtains of the half-tester.

At the sight of the bed the heart of the hostler became suddenly sick within him. With white lips and shaking knees

he vacated his place in the procession, and pushing past the landlord, who was still poising himself at the stair-head, he made his way to the room below. At that moment, could their limbs have borne them, his companions would have followed him. They huddled together in the corner of the landing, holding their breath, and listening until the tap-room door opened and shut; and they knew themselves alone with the sleeper.

For the terror of those strained minutes, it might have been the old man behind the curtains who was the ambushed watcher.

The wind had lulled and the rain, falling ceaselessly and silently, made no sound on the thatched roof. For a while the dog was silent in the yard.

This was an old man, scant of breath, or surely his breathing could have been heard in the dreadful calmness of the night.

The landlord, with his shoulders raised, had stolen on tip-toe into the room. One of the candles was now guttering and flaring preparatory to going out; the fragment of the other burnt on with a long, red, smoking wick, lighting up the bright point of the rusty case-knife clenched in his fingers.

He glanced upward at the brutal fea-

tures of the footpad. Their eyes met with the same thought in each. It was the recollection of *that other night*, when they had stolen into that room to rob another helpless, sleeping old man of sleep and life.

The great silence was not to be borne. The footpad put out his hand and thrust the landlord forward by the shoulder. He drew back, stumbling heavily. As he recovered himself, they both sprang forward towards the bed and tore back the old green curtains.

Behind these, his poor white face thrown back over the pillows, lay the old man, his thin hands rigidly grasping the edges of the sheet drawn up close under his chin. They leaned over the bed and half drew back.

"By God! 'tis very like *him*," said the landlord in a whisper.

George had his hands on the sheet and pulled it back roughly.

"It *is* him, by God!" he cried. For as he pulled back the sheet, the last candle flared up and died down and went out. Its last light shone on the sleeper's throat, gashed across—horribly gaping—red and wet. This was no stranger, but the man they had murdered a year ago; they had left him just so last Christmas morning.

There was a heavy fall on the floor in the dark, and someone rushed to the stair, screaming loudly.

The dog in the yard whined with pleasure to hear a human voice, and then once more there was the silence of death in the "Hare and Billet."

* * * * *

In the red haze of early Christmas morning the hostler came up the sodden lane, and with him, plashing in the white water of the cart ruts, walked the village constable and the bell-ringers, who had adjourned from East Wickham belfry to drink in Christmas at the "Old Fox." Marching with them were the unsteady white gaiters of two Grenadiers furloughing in the village.

A wet and miserable dog, who dragged a broken chain, leaped forward in delight at their coming, and through the unlatched door the party poured into the house. A Grenadier drew his bayonet, and tramped upstairs like a bold man, and the crowd hustled one another to follow him.

In the best bedroom the landlord lay dead on the floor, dead beside the white counterpane and unpressed pillows of an empty bed. Something wrong with his heart, folk said.

By the gate of the straw-yard the constable picked up a brass-barrelled pistol; and wandering about on the wet straw they found a man with cropped black hair and a heavy jowl, who jibbered and said he was His sacred Majesty, King George, and God bless Him.

A STRAYED SHEEP.

CHAPTER I.

"AT last," said Beilby Bennett to himself, as the family solicitor opened the will, "I shall have my reward!"

Beilby Bennett had been for thirteen years a clerk in the Reliance Bank. He had a salary, expectations and ambition. The salary enabled him to live and to improve his mind until the expectations, realised, should permit him to attain the ambition.

The salary was £120 annually; the expectations were from his aunt, Miss Beilby, of The Retreat, Balham.

He didn't know exactly how much it was that Miss Beilby had authorised him to expect, but as the estate, whatever it was, had long kept in prim luxury Miss Beilby, her three maids, and the Scotch gardener who came on Tuesdays and Fridays, and had lightened the lot of more than one chosen vessel in the neighbour-

hood of Balham, Beilby Bennett concluded that it would at least keep him in the path that leads to Vice-Chairmanship of May Meetings and Churchwardenship at St. Mark's, Beulah Terrace, that gray stone redoubt against the encroachments of Rome in the South-Eastern postal district.

For such was his ambition; had been all through his evenly-ordered life of office-work, Birkbeck classes, prayer-meetings, Sunday School, pious weekly evenings at Balham, and decorous yearly fortnights at St. Leonards.

Nursing this ambition, he had let life slip by him day by day, till from the dream of the copiously pious youth of seventeen, it had grown to seem the reasonable due of the man of thirty, a little hardened by waiting, whose piety had set about his ambition like a fruit round its kernel.

It was this man, angular, pale-eyed, with colourless cheeks divided from the ears only by a patch of uncertain-tinted whisker, who sat on the edge of a horse-hair chair in the library at Balham, listening to the reading of his aunt's will.

He wore the black trousers that he had ordered when the doctor gave up hope. His coat of habitual black became him execrably; still more the repressed eagerness that curled his mouth on one side.

He was rich now—no more need to work. Only to live universally respected, and have eulogistic notices in the *Rock* and the *Record* when he died. He thought of the notices as if he were to be one of those who read them. Yesterday he had severed his connection with the *Reliance* with an abruptness that seriously annoyed the manager, and he had been succeeded by his Junior, whose place had been filled by the first on the list of 170 respectable young men whose names were down for that eligible situation.

"To my nephew, Beilby Bennett, the sum of £200 sterling, to be paid him at the age of 21 years. Also—"

Beilby's mouth relaxed, and he listened stupidly to the small bequests to cook, house, parlourmaid, and McTavish, and to the pattering golden rain of the residuary estate falling upon that opulent Danaë, the British and Foreign Bible Society.

At the age of twenty-one! In a dream he heard the lawyer explaining how this will was dated thirteen years back, and how no later will could be found.

This legacy had been planted when his aunt first brought him to town and got him his berth in the *Reliance*. And after all these years of assiduous cultivation of the aunt the legacy still stood dry and sapless!

And Providence had permitted it.

All these years of Sunday School, and Birkbeck, and dust-coloured self-improvement and self-denial counted for nothing, then?

He stood up and mechanically rubbed his tall hat with his black coat-sleeve.

"I think I'll be getting home," he said, and went out.

He was not acutely conscious again till he had reached the station and learned that he would have to wait thirty-five minutes for a train.

Then he woke to the bareness of the station, and the depth of the October mist. His moral sense had taken a bewildering half-turn, the cords were loosed. The world was a new place, and he on it, with a new stand-point, looked at it curiously. He found himself staring at the theatre placards—no longer as signboards to Hell for others, but as indications of defiant possibilities for himself. He felt as the child feels who, unjustly punished, avenges its wrong by breaking the weightiest commandment within nursery reach.

The lights of London, now quickly multiplying in the autumn dusk, seemed to him as the kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof.

He had never travelled by any but

second class. Now he took a third-class ticket. He would not waste his money on travelling, and he looked again towards the luminous haze of the City.

He would do everything he had been taught not to do—everything! He would go to theatres and——

No. The first thing to do was to get money. His £200 would not keep him long, even in virtue's path, and that was no longer what he proposed to himself. He must make money—how did wicked people make money? By betting on horse-races, by playing billiards and cards, by floating public companies, by a thousand arts unknown to his innocence. He sighed.

He woke from these musings, in his place in the corner of an uncushioned carriage, and became aware of a little round-shouldered, round-faced man who, with his hand discreetly held before his mouth, was attracting Beilby's attention by a series of deprecatory coughs.

"Evenin', Mr. Bennett, evenin', sir!"

"Good evening," Beilby said, mechanically, looking at him without recognition.

"The grateful 'art, sir," began the man apologetically—"but I see you don't know me, sir. The pore sinner, sir, wot you snatched from the gulp at the Tea an' Address to Released Lags, sir."

"To what?" asked Beilby.

"To discharged criminils, sir," explained his companion, edging a little nearer on the varnished seat.

"I remember," said Beilby.

He did remember. He remembered the white-washed brick building and the flaring gas-jet, the severe texts in red, the temperance mottoes in blue, the thick loan crockery, the heavy, sallow faces with shining eyes, the mingled scent of chicory and warm humanity.

"Let me see. I think you told me you had been—" Beilby distrusted his memory.

"Smashing it were, sir," interposed the man, lowering his voice, "an' sivin year it were, but now, thanks to your noble words an' the other good genelman's 'elp, I'm a earnin' a honest livin', drawin' my quid reglar."

"And do you like it any better?" asked Beilby, suddenly leaning forward with his hands on his knees.

"Never knowed wot 'appiness was afore, sir," said the man sadly, fingering the clay pipe in his breast pocket, thrust there at the beginning of the interview, and from which threads of smoke were winding.

"Your old life must have been a very wicked one," said Beilby wistfully.

"Awful!" the man answered. "To the

tune of ten or fifteen quid a week it were, an' easy work—an' the finest plant ever you see. But I'm shot of all that wickedness now, by the blessing——" he stopped and looked hard at Beilby, who asked, with sudden sharpness:

"Why don't you work at it now?"

"I'm too well known, sir—to say nothin' of—besides, there's the plant. I can't get it—not that that——"; he stopped short again and muttered something about "taking his Bible if he knew what the genelman was up to with a pore man."

"Could you get your 'plant' again if you had the money?"

"I ain't," replied the man cautiously, "I ain't a sayin' anything what you can use agin me when I say I ain't got no money."

"No—but I have," said Bennett, with an earnest face, "I've two hundred pounds."

The man extracted his pipe from his pocket, lighted it with a match drawn across his leg, and, with his round eyes still fixed on him, slowly shifted his seat in the place exactly opposite Beilby and leaned forward till the two faces were very near.

Then they spoke.

When they left London Bridge Station they left it together, and the two faces—both very earnest now—were turned towards the Gray's Inn Road.

CHAPTER II.

BEILBY Bennett looked out of the big front bedroom at "Chatsworth."

"Chatsworth," Ellerdale Road, Lewisham (£28 yearly) had been rented by Beilby and his friend and fellow-clerk Jones. But Jones had accepted £300 a year and a pony carriage, in obedience to a "call," and had set sail for the Fiji Islands with the chemist's daughter from the corner shop. So that the end of the lease of "Chatsworth" remained to Mr. Bennett an undesired and undivided trust.

He had a board put up and was hoping to let, when his aunt died. Then he didn't care whether he let or not. Now he was glad he had not, for here, if anywhere, might "plant" and William Biddle lie hid.

The respectable little yellow villa, with its six cypresses in the front garden, its neat window-blinds, its housekeeper—the infirm widow of a gentleman of colour—its six orderly rooms, its blameless character—what better haven could be found

for that pirate craft, the Biddle, and its contraband cargo?

The big front bedroom that had been Jones's, and where after Jones's marriage, Beilby had been used to hold the Bible Class. He sighed as he remembered how its five members had apostatised in a body when the local Institute bought a billiard table. Then he laughed at himself for sighing.

Beilby Bennett, the Young Man Christian of thirteen years' standing, had made a pact with Satan through his agent, William Biddle, and with their aid he was going to do the wickedest thing he could think of; wicked, and at the same time profitable—"to the tune of ten or fifteen quid a week".

He would coin money, like William Biddle, and he would not be found out, as William Biddle had been. As for the round-faced criminal, well, he had only been honest because he couldn't get at the means of dishonesty; and if he lived at Chatsworth in the character of Beilby's long-lost uncle, he would at least be kept from drink—that awful curse which——

Bennett pulled himself up short on the edge of one of the old phrases.

He was living in a sort of mental and physical exaltation, which made what he was doing seem only the just retort to the injustice of fate.

Wicked? Yes, he wanted to be wicked! Go to hell for it? Well, then, why did Providence let such a thing happen to him?

His berth gone, his expectations gone; his life, its best years, gone! Whose fault was all this? Not Beilby's, clearly.

He leaned on the window-sill, and looked anxiously up and down the street. A cart with shrubs in pots turned the corner, and came slowly towards the house. He went down and bought six, and carried them up to the big front bedroom. Three on each window. They were as good as drawn venetians, and less compromising.

Then he went into the respectable basement room, where the relict of the coloured gentleman spent her leisure.

"I'm expecting some cases from my poor aunt's, Mrs. Morvin. I think we might put them in Mr. Jones's room for the present."

"Yes, sir; or down here, sir—they wouldn't be the least in my way, Mr. Bennett."

A sound of wheels on the road. Beilby, running to the front-door, found drawn up in front of it a light cart. Mr. Biddle himself, in the habit of a master mechanic, stood shyly grinning by the pony's head.

The three large deal cases were not very

easy to get up the stairs. Progress was further complicated by the assistance of Mrs. Morvin. The biggest one stuck at the turn of the stairs.

"Why not unpack it here, Mr. Bennett? I've a hammer and chisel 'andy."

Beilby's pale face glowed with the effort that got the case past the turn, at the cost of two broken bannisters and a hole in the wall.

"I think not," he said. "Thank you, I think not."

When all the cases were set down in the big front room that had been Jones's, Mr. Bennett turned to Mr. Biddle.

"Your pony will stand, I suppose?"

"Stand till 'e drops, sir."

"I think you said you wanted a word with me—about—a—a—about a spiritual matter."

"Right you are, sir," replied Mr. Biddle with cheerful readiness, and a look at the housekeeper.

Mrs. Morvin, long in the confidence of Beilby—the Beilby who had expectations—looked at the cases. That they contained the whole of the deceased aunt's fortune in gold she did not for an instant doubt. She went, but the hammer and chisel went with her.

Beilby shut the door and locked it—and

the two men stood looking at each other over the big case.

As Mrs. Morvin's shoe pressed the bottom stairs Biddle took out an inch or two of steel, queerly shaped, spat on his hands, and had three cases open in as many minutes, laying bare a mixed mass of crucibles, batteries, coils, metal in bars, and the dusty cobwebs of the Clerkenwell cellar where the "plant" had laid during the seven years of Mr. Biddle's personal restraint.

When the last board was off, Mr. Biddle wiped his brow with a piece of cotton-waste from the case next him, spat on his hands again, rubbed them together, and said gaily:

"Now to business. I think, sir, you named sperrits. Well, sir an' govenur, far be it from me to deny as you've come down 'andsome to me an my mate for the 'plant,' an' please God you and me'll do many a good day's work with it yet. But I can't work as I am now. I 'aven't, as you might say, the 'art for it. I've lived steady an' I've lived low, 'an afore I could do justice to me an' to you in a job like this, I must go wot you may call a buster. Bread an' butter 'as been my meat, an' four-ale 'as bin my drink. An' now I must 'ave all I wants to eat, an'

mor'n all I wants to drink. You let me run loose two-three days, an' so 'elp me I shall come back fit!"

"Do you mean to say you're deliberately going to give way to drink?" faltered Beilby nervously, a sensation as of nightmare growing on him.

"Not to give away to it. Don't you make no error. Boozed or blind I'm dark. You say that to yourself now, when you feel low. You say, 'William Biddle 'e may be blind, but 'e's dark is William, even when 'e can't see no 'oles in a ladder.'"

"Couldn't we work a bit first?" suggested Mr. Bennett struggling with a growing horror of being left alone with the "plant."

"Try your 'and," Mr. Biddle answered encouragingly; "try your 'and on the stuff certinly—you'll 'ave 'eaps of time afore I come back—or read the book there," indicating a dog's-eared copy of a work on Metallurgy by a Kensington Professor.

"But you, Biddle, do let me induce you to give up this dreadful design of—"

"Barney," Mr. Biddle winked, "a tenpun-note will meet the case."

There was no threat in the words, no threat in the tone. The threat was in Mr. Biddle's very existence.

The case was met by the "tenpun-note." The stairs creaked, the front gate clicked, and Mr. Beilby Bennett, of the Reliance Bank and the Y.M.C.A., was left alone with that "plant" for which, as for another Rachel, Mr. Biddle had served seven years.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. Morvin, though Welsh, was honest—she would not have laid a finger, save in the way of curiosity, on one of the golden sovereigns with which she supposed the cases lined—but in the way of curiosity she would have laid hands on the Ark of the Covenant itself.

Yet Beilby's first bad quarter of an hour was wearing itself into the second before she presented herself—hammer and chisel in hand—before the door of the room that had been Jones's.

"I'm ready to help you now," she said through the door. She did not stoop to the key-hole—she knew the house too well—but she laid her ear to the crack of the door, if peradventure she might hear the chink, chink of the gold.

Beilby, on the other side of the door, had started guiltily to his feet and stood holding the Metallurgic pamphlet crumpled in one hand. He held the other hand to his forehead. Life was getting too com-

plicated. He began to understand now what he had meant when he had talked at Y.M.C. meetings of the "straight path of virtue."

There was a disconcerting pause before he could find voice to say:

"Thank you, Mrs. Morvin, but I've no thought of opening them just now. My mind is occupied with thoughts of—of death and judgment, Mrs. Morvin," He was horrified and yet pleased to find himself still speaking the old language and added, "My poor aunt—Mrs. Morvin. It's a theme for reflection—a sacred theme."

Mrs. Morvin put her handkerchief to her eyes, forgetting that he could not see her, and marked her retirement by a series of sniffs graduated to reach his ears.

Then Beilby sat down again—his forehead was wet—his, that never perspired even on Sunday afternoons in church—he was trembling all over with excitement.

For him the world was divided sharply into sheep and goats. He had leaped the boundary—Mrs. Morvin was still a sheep, and, as such, must be got rid of. It was now getting late. He went down to the sitting-room, where a tin of salmon and a lettuce were ready to help him in a pretence of supping. "I shall want nothing more," he said, "to-night. Go to bed,

Mrs. Morvin; you look tired. Indeed, I've noticed you've not been looking well lately." "That," he thought, as he pulled the bed clothes over his head, "was a good beginning."

He spent a night of feverish half-sleep, oppressed by the sense of his own abandoned wickedness—which grew heavier as consciousness abated, and when he did fall asleep crushed him as a nightmare.

He rose mechanically at seven—the custom of thirteen years still on him; he read his morning texts from the "Bible Fear Nots" that his aunt had given him, and went through his religious exercises as usual. It was not till he opened his door and saw the broken bannisters and the hole in the wall that he remembered with an icy shock that ran all down his spine, that he was now a goat, and that religious exercises were not for him.

He pulled himself together and went down to breakfast, not weakening at all in his resolve of revenge on the Heavenly Powers and the social system that had wronged him.

The same steadfastness of character that had kept him constant to his desk at the Reliance those thirteen years, stood him in good stead now.

He had been a good sheep—as good as

he knew how to be—and it had all been of no use. Now he was on the outside of the fold he would be no gingerly sinner.

He ate a good breakfast—the Metallurgic pamphlet open in front of him, propped up by the toast-rack.

Then he went up to have a look at the "plant," and as he went he whistled a Moody and Sankey air.

He pulled the blinds up, saw the steam of his customary train rise from the yellow parapet of the railway bridge, saw it with a pang sharp and unlooked for. Hitherto he had only seen that sight on holidays; well, he had a long holiday now.

There was a step outside the door, he had forgotten to close it. He sprang to it in time to close it in the face of Mrs. Morvin, panting and duster-laden.

"I thought, sir, that perhaps, as you've made a tidy breakfast, you might be feeling more resigned this morning."

He came out and closed the door, keeping his fingers on the porcelain handle.

"You're looking pale, Mrs. Morvin," he said hastily (at breakfast he had prepared an appropriate speech). Mrs. Morvin's face, flushed with the ascent of the stairs, shone reproachfully at him.

"That is," he continued hastily, "you're looking unwell. I've noticed it for some

time past, and I'm resolved that you shall not wear yourself out by your devoted attention to me."

At hearing her restful life in the basement referred to in these terms, Mrs. Morvin could only gaze at him with wilder astonishment.

"Yes," said Beilby, with decision, "my aunt's being thus called away has provided me with the means of—— Mrs. Morvin, you shall go for a week or two to some seaside place, where the air is bracing and the spiritual privileges of home can be enjoyed. A ten pound note," he began.

"Oh, sir, I couldn't" said Mrs. Morvin joyously.

"A ten pound note," he went on abstractedly, "will meet the case." He flushed, recognising the phrase.

"A ten pun note," said Mrs. Morvin, "is a ten pun note, and very handsome, too; and if you see your way in a fortnight's time, sir, I sha'n't be the woman to say 'No' to a generous offer. But leave you now, sir, in all your affliction and bereavement, and with them cases still on your mind——No, sir; never" and her handkerchief to her eyes, retreated to the basement, affected to tears by the way in which she had expressed her creditable sentiments.

Those cases on his mind! They were indeed. As the day wore on they looked larger, more compromising, more unconcealable. He still studied the pamphlet. Even now whole pages of it will say themselves to him when his thoughts would be elsewhere.

He slept the sleep of complete mental and physical prostration, and got up on the second morning with the feeling that the "plant" had been there as long as he could remember. Mrs. Morvin came to the door seven or eight times a day with sympathy, or tea, or "an egg beat up," or the circulars that came by post. Towards evening of the second day the one interest in life was the question, "When will Biddle come back?"

People talk of living a life in a minute—at moments of great peril. Bennett served twenty years for every hour the second day; and an eternity of perdition for every minute of the third—and still Biddle did not come.

The torture of enforced idleness in face of a great resolution, was hell to a man whose first idle days these were.

The milkman, the greengrocer for orders, and Mrs. Morvin's niece from Hackney Wick alike brought him fleetfoot to the vantage-point of the broken balusters, and

still Biddle did not come. On the third evening he was as usual looking out between the shrubs. Hope was almost dead. Probably Biddle wouldn't come, and Beilby didn't much care if he didn't.

The postman again. Mrs. Morvin's persistent knuckles on the panel—a big blue envelope. How people waste their money on these advertisements.

He opened it listlessly. Peppering's Kidder Squares, or Somers' Salvage Stock would be at least as good reading as the "Handbook."

And still Biddle did not come.

Not an advertisement—a letter and an enclosure. A letter from his aunt's solicitor, enclosing a copy of a rational will made by Miss Beilby, of Balham, only three months before, in which the only name worth mentioning was Beilby Bennett, residuary legatee and sole executor. Fortunate Beilby Bennett!

CHAPTER IV.

THE future churchwarden of St. Mark's, and vice-chairman of May Meetings, instinctively dropped the piece of cotton waste which he had been aimlessly dabbing into the recesses of the "plant." He put on the respectable morning coat that hung despondingly on the chair beside him, and dressed himself erect. He might have known that a really good woman like his aunt would not have given way to such criminal negligence.

What a three days he had passed; but never mind, that was all over now. Was it? His eye fell on the "plant" and he stopped short in the middle of a deep breath of relief. He sat down on the edge of the big case and mechanically recovering the piece of cotton-waste, he wiped his brow with a look of loathing at the cobwebbed evidences of his past madness.

But even as he looked his face brightened. True the "plant" was there, but

Biddle was not. Biddle, he repeated to himself encouragingly, Biddle had perished. Biddle had perished, cut off in some drunken orgie. Alive he would have returned before this, if not to follow the course of vice he had mapped out for himself "to the tune of ten to fifteen quid a week," at least to have the case met with more ten pound notes. In the midst of his anxiety he felt a certain comfort in the recollection that he had warned Biddle against drink. But an over-ruling hand, while benefiting the Excise, had rid him of Biddle. He would rid himself of the "plant." Should his inexperienced hands cart it by night to an eligible building lot and there leave it? He had no cart, he could not drive, he could not lift the packages himself.

Would Mrs. Morvin, left alone at Chatsworth on a comfortable annuity, respect a Bluebeard Chamber? The question answered itself. There remained one alternative. His frame rigid with resolution he stepped into his bedroom, returning with "Every Man his own Lawyer." Seated on the packing-case, he read eagerly for five minutes, then closed the book, and sent Mrs. Morvin off with a letter to a fellow-clerk at the Reliance, asking for the return by messenger of his

two office towels and serge office jacket.

From between the pots, in the room that had been Jones's, he watched Mrs. Morvin, cumbrously apparelled and provisioned as for a week's tour, tack and fill on her way up the road. As soon as she had turned the corner. he fell upon the "plant" with the coal hammer from downstairs. Being a prudent man, he had his paraffin in by the cask. Now drawing jugful after jugful, he poured it over sofa, chairs, bed and staircase, lavishing it profusely on the "plant," which he scattered through the house amid those surroundings which seemed most inflammable. Then, with a last glance at "His own Lawyer" to refresh his memory of the penalties attaching to the felony of arson, Mr. Beilby Bennet shaved, washed his hands, arrayed himself in the morning coat and high hat of three days ago.

Taking the safety matches from his bedroom candlestick, he fired the whole house from top to bottom, and selecting his umbrella from the rack, bolted the front door and quitted the house by the side entrance as he was accustomed to do on Sunday evenings. Then he went over to Balham to see his aunt's solicitor.

* * * * *

"Hooray!" shouted the delighted crowd, "here's another engine."

"Another engine"—the third to arrive—had driven up in front of "Chatsworth." The first engine had evidently arrived too late to be of service. The roof had long ago fallen into the room which had been Mr. Jones's.

"You see, sir," said a policeman to the agitated Beilby, as he joined the crowd, "the people, when they *did* see it on fire, lost too much time in workin' the front door knocker before they sent for the engines—though, of course, it wasn't their business."

Fortunately for Beilby, public interest, excited by his dramatic return, veered suddenly round to the front lawn of "Castletowers," the next semi-detached, where the father of the family, summoned in his shirt sleeves from the "Spotted Cow," had in his excitement placed his infant twins on the top of his rescued cottage pianoforte, apparently associating it with the idea of a raft.

He hastened to turn away, evading the reporter of the *Kentish Mercury*, and was edging out of the crowd, when a hand was laid on his arm, and a warm breath fanned his ear.

"Gawd 'elp us; 'ere's a go," said William Biddle.

William Biddle's black coat was torn, his resplendent linen was dimmed, his eyes were puffy and rimmed with black.

Beilby looked at him and drew back a few paces.

"If I'd only 'a' come back last night, which were my fixed intent, this 'ere blow wouldn't never 'a' fallen. An' I'd got this 'at an' coat, an' all to do yer credit—an' now!"

"I see you've been drinking," said Beilby, severely.

"Well, I don't deceive ye, sir. I've been on the drink till I 'ad the chuck this artemnoon from the 'Porkypine' with the 'orrors a-comin' on me; but a day's sleep 'ud 'a' put me to rights—an' now!"

Beilby braced himself up. Everything depended on this moment.

"I suppose there arn't nothing o' the 'plant' pulled out o' the fire—let's 'ope not, any way. O Lor'! I never thought o' that; but any way there's a tidy plum left outer your two 'undred, and wot with your money and my brains, why, we'll—"

He stopped, looked vaguely at Beilby, and added,

"Won't us? An' for the present a ten-pun' note'll meet the case."

Hitherto they had spoken in whispers. Now Beilby cleared his throat, and spoke

out, not loudly, but just so that the nearest groups might hear voice without words.

"William Biddle," he said, "you have been drinking; you are drunk now! Whether in connection with 'plants,' or other forms of labour, I can never give you any employment. Lest you should deem me harsh, let me remind you that I first met you at a Criminal Tea and Address. You recalled yourself to me in the train some nights ago. Subsequently calling here with a cart, you borrowed ten pounds of me, for the safe bestowal of your stock in trade which you said was in that cart. What, in your abandoned courses, you have done with that stock in trade, or that ten pounds, I do not seek to enquire. It is enough for me—"

Biddle, purple faced and trembling, interposed:

"But the plant, an' our work, an' the ten to fifteen quid——"

Beilby turned his cold blue eyes fixedly on him.

"You are either mad or drunk," he said sadly, "and in either case the police——"

Biddle paled, but stood firm.

"Not, sir," he said, "not that! I'll go quiet. It's all the drink, sir, as done it. The spirits was too willin', sir. It's plain I've got 'em. As a real good, noble gen-

elman like you, too, an' me wot actoo-ally fancied——"

"What you fancied is to no purpose, Biddle. You have repaid my loan only with base ingratitude. You have forfeited my respect, and that of all other honest men; I hope you'll repent before it is too late. Good-bye."

The man turned slowly away. Bennett looked after him, flushed, and made a step forward.

"Here," he said, "I don't want to be hard on you." He pressed a coin into the other's hand. "Now go."

And William Biddle went.

When he got into the bar of the "Spotted Cow," he unclosed his hand, and passed the coin across the counter.

It was a shilling!

FOR THE OLD FEUD'S SAKE.

"The young man's wrath is like light straw on fire,
But like red-hot iron is the old man's ire.
The young man will brawl at the evening board,
But the old man will draw at the dawning his sword."

It was very hot. The evening had brought relief only to the pebbles at the harbour-side which hissed as the tide came smoothly up to cover them, and to the little green crabs, who had lain torpid under the sand, and who now staggered up in rapture to greet the cool ripple overhead. But no breeze came in with the tide, and the quay and the tall, white houses, still red in the sunset, were baking in the after-glow, and throwing off stifling waves of the heat gathered in the long hours of blazing sunshine.

Passing the end of the quay went the cheerful rataplan of the band bringing back, after a day's evolutionary marching, all that was left of the one hundred and second regiment of the line. They were

coming over the stones with a limping swing, and their faces were damp and pallid under the bronze, for it was very hot. Women in blue skirts and white caps, sat on the doorsteps, knitting long, black stockings. Labour, having clattered out from the hardware factories and eaten its cabbage soup, now stood about with blotched face and patient eyes, drawing nepenthe from strange cigars.

The Museum gate had closed against the panting American family, and outside its bars, the eldest daughter—graduate of Vassar—stood ticking off in her guide-book the objects of interest that day visited. Her father, stupefied with sunshine and sight-seeing, a Pork King in exile, was spitting sadly on the hot flagstones and reflecting on the gloomy responsibilities of wealth and culture.

Though the sky was growing dusk, there were few lights in the windows, because almost everyone was out of doors. Only the *Cafés* and *Estaminets* were glowing with gas—but patches of light in the street's deepening shadow. The brightest, hottest glare streamed across the road from the Palais de l'Orient.

In name only, did the Palais de l'Orient reflect the voluptuous East. A large room, open at one end to the street and lit by

two flaring gas-chandeliers, its simple appointments left the imagination free to furnish it as the halls of Giamschid. There was a piano in a corner at the far end, and a daïs of rough boarding draped with a little red cloth, before which were two oil lamps with tin reflectors. The piano was jangling an accompaniment to the care-worn artist in a black dress-coat, who supported his hat at the end of his cane, which he carried on his shoulder at the slope. The song was of a certain Léocadie and directed attention to the vivacity rather than to the domestic qualities of that young person. The blue and black cotton blouses seated round the room, and the *sous-officiers* standing by the door, joined in the final chorus as if it were a ritual response. The tweed-clad Englishman seated alone, and listening patiently at a marble-topped table in the middle, had recognised a phrase in the preceding verse and applauded his linguistic success by stamping with his feet, but at the chorus which sounded in his ears as "Et si zing enfin balabonne ta-ra" he sank back in his chair with an air of disappointment and defeat. To fluently summon the waiter as "*garçon*" and to demand of him "*un autre bock de bière*" was some solace, but the hopeless task of checking the curious

numismatic collection of small silver of many times and countries which the waiter poured into his hands in exchange for his gold napoleon, depressed him even more than the unintelligible chorus.

The singer resumed his chair on the daïs, placing his hat and stick carefully beside him, and the young lady in the Swiss dress, who sat near him, rose and tripped forward to the front of the platform. She smiled to the Englishman who had changed the napoleon. That is, she addressed herself towards him, for she smiled always, even when her eyes showed her anger at the scanty audience, who, pigs that they were, had no appreciation of art in their provincial souls.

She stood forward in the glare of the gas, singing of the mountains, and the cows, and the *châlets* where Love lives, his full shirt sleeves looped with ribands; those happy mountains where pastoral life is but an open-air flirtation, varied by pipe and dance. The short skirts that the mountaineer's life demands were soiled and crumpled, and the tourist sat wondering at the solid pink of her cheeks, and the amplitude of her charms struggling with the pink laces of the bodice under diaphanous gauze.

Two men, alone at a corner table,

gate of my long exile. You know the town well, eh, Monsieur?"

The other nodded.

"You know the sand beach to the west, where the mussel-beds begin. Thirty years ago I came there one early morning in the rain, hurrying there from England—England that I've never seen since. The packet that brought us seemed to crawl across the water. I came there to shoot an old friend for the supplanting dog that he was. All for a woman's sake, Monsieur will readily believe. All for a woman's sake, who loved me long before *he* came to fawn on her with his poetry and his *bavardage* about pictures. Yes, thirty years ago we lay there together, and his witnesses carried him away, and mine left me there, the hounds, for the police to bring in to the hospital over there."

"And Monsieur was restored there to his health?" enquired the Professor of English.

"I lay there till one fine morning, when his bullet sloughed out of my shoulder," said the traveller in soap, shrugging his left shoulder violently, "and then I made over the border. Could I face his mother, who petted us as boys together, or Her, who loved him? And so we've both been dead this many a year.

There was a chinking of coins, and the Swiss girl stood before them, still smiling as she extended a little metal tray—which might have held some two francs in copper. The speaker twirled his moustache and dropped in half a franc, with the ghost of a faded swagger. The Professor dropped in the penny he had been fidgetting in his hand, and detained the tray while he went through his pocket for three sous more; and while on the *daïs* a young girl, with a white face and black gauze skirts, began a *pas seul* accompanied by castanets, the Swiss lady seated herself by the tourist. He put two francs in the dish, and gallantly summoned the waiter to minister to her wants. As an international courtesy she drank "*portaires*," a dark mixture, apparently a species of "dog's nose" for summer consumption, qualified by port wine and served in a tumbler at the cost of a franc.

The Professor drained his glass, and lit the cigar-end which he had allowed to die out.

"This place is very warm," he said; "the gas is indeed stifling. If I could induce Monsieur, whose conversation fills me with interest, to allow me to offer him such hospitality as my mean lodging will afford?"

"Monsieur is too amiable." The *commis-voyageur* threw away his cigarette-end and

followed the Professor, who shuffled out into the street.

The sky had darkened since they entered the Palais de l'Orient, and even to men newly released from the gas-blaze and cigar-smoke the night air was oppressively hot.

A slight wind had sprung up and was wandering through the alleys and by-ways and hurrying by the corners, whining as it went like a wind that had lost its way among the shadows.

As they turned the corner of the square the two plane trees by the empty newspaper kiosque suddenly cried out, lashing their leaves together, and the first round spots of rain pattered on the dry pavement. The Professor of English shrugged his stooping shoulders, and, looking up at the falling rain with the antipathy of a surprised cat, doubled with a tottering run into the narrowest and darkest issue from the square. The shower fell faster, the leaden gutters began to drip, and the great drops from the sky rebounded from the ledges into the abysmal depths of the old Flemish Street below. The *commis-voyageur* buttoned over his chest the feeble defence of the thread-bare frock coat and strode after his retreating guide—bearing himself squarely erect and stiffening out his chest as he went, in instinc-

tive contrast to the figure that stooped and ran before him.

A corner, turning into a still narrower by-way, hid the Professor from sight, and his guest found him cowering under the dripstone of a doorway. The dripstone ended in the carven heads of two crowned kings, and over it was a crumbling panel with a shield charged with a weather-worn lion, ramping faintly against time and change.

A majestic old house in its decay, whose walls seemed to look down with sympathy at the little traveller in scented soaps who stood in its shadow, carrying himself with something of old stateliness in the face of age and fallen fortune.

The Professor pulled again and again at the creaking wire though no bell answered his efforts, but the straining of the rusty fittings must have been noticed within, for a grating was pulled open, and from that point of vantage their appearance was carefully reconnoitred.

One of them was readily recognised, a lesser door opened in the side of the greater one, and a little girl, who was supping on a *tartine*, ran back into a room at the side, leaving the two men to secure the entrance.

With a grave bow to his guest, the Professor led the way up the great staircase, worn by many generations of townsmen, the steps rounded at the edge into a perilous way for strange feet. But the old man limped upstairs as up a familiar path, instinctively avoiding the broken step. At the foot of the great carved rail of the balustrade squatted a little wooden lion, who grinned at the *commis-voyageur* as if time had resigned him to the loss of his tail, and philosophy consoled him under the indignity of having J. B. L. and a recent, but illegible date scratched on his face. M. Lefevre laid a kindly hand upon the head as he mounted the stairs, patting it as if it were a stray dog. "Poor beast," he murmured, "lost in a strange century."

The child who had opened the door ran out from her room and looked up shyly, still nibbling her slice of bread.

"Bon soir, Papa Durand," she cried; and the Professor turned on the landing above to reply tenderly, "Bon soir, p'tite."

"A strange old house," said M. Lefevre. They were mounting by a dark and narrow back-staircase, past floor after floor of closed doorways.

"Many of these rooms have no lodgers," said the Professor, "because the dry-rot

has been there so long, and one would not desire to disappear suddenly through the floor of one's room like Arlequin through the trap-door."

"The house of some great man in the old time?"

"A Prince's house. Alva lodged here when the Spaniards marched in, and an Archbishop used to haunt the passage; but my landlord, Monsieur Vanderspies, has latterly let rooms to people who are not *convenable*, and this is no longer a house that a Prince of the Church can haunt without scandal."

The Professor chuckled grimly as he inserted a large key and pushed open the door of a room. They were in the tallest gable of the house, and after stumbling up the dark stairs the room seemed very light. The shower had almost ceased, and the bare walls were splashed and streaked with glorious reds and yellows from the sun just disappearing into the still sea, whose golden-grey field could be seen over the roofs and chimney-pots and masts below.

The guest sat down in the one chair by the window, and the host pulled aside the white curtain of the alcove and seated himself on the edge of the bed; the walls were bare, but for the place where the

Professor had nailed up a pencilled scheme of the hours of his classes and pupils. The floor was bare of carpet, in one corner was a pile of newspapers—the *Indépendance Belge*, the *Petit Journal*—and in this strange company a heap of the English *Times*, its stout respectable paper and clear type protesting against the association. Beside these was a tattered assemblage of novels, few of which retained their yellow wrapper, many of them having been re-bound by the simple expedient of a piece of string tied round their bodies. A squad of empty jars, which once held Schiedam, ranged themselves in double file in the shadow of the opposite corner; a short house-broom with few remaining bristles leaning against the wall beside, appearing to watch them like a dissipated civilian spectator. Another bottle, who seemed to have deserted in the bad company of a tumbler and a blackened ink-bottle, lurked by the fireplace in ambush behind a number of old boots, now in the last stages of shabbiness, when heels are worn to the ground and the broken “uppers” rise and part from soles worn and curved.

An old walnut table with a tea-cup and a tobacco-jar completed the furniture of the chamber. Absolutely nothing more, save what might lie in the recesses of a

large cupboard. And a man had lived here thirty years.

“One obtains quiet here,” said the Professor, “a silence which encourages meditation. No one else on this floor, which, you will have noticed to your cost, is *au septième*. No one but the wind, who would seem in the winter to make this his headquarters for Flanders, and who is, I assure you, a riotous and unamiable fellow-lodger.”

“The view from the window is indeed charming,” said the guest, politely, turning in his chair.

“If Monsieur will stand at this side,” said the Professor, coming forward to the light, “he will see the patch of sands uncovered beyond the harbour. No? Then the tide has not yet retreated.”

M. Lefevre stood up and gazed at the distant sea, and the black speck with a long trail of smoke which was a steamer that would lie to-morrow morning in the docks of St. Katherine by the Tower. When he saw that, he sighed a little and dressed his figure still more uprightly.

Old M. Durand was hobbling back from the cupboard with a yellow and well-thumbed number of the *Times*.

“There is something here,” he said, indicating with a trembling forefinger

a paragraph surrounded by ink-lines.

The other took it; his curiosity was excited by the evident agitation of M. Durand. "Why, this is a *Times* of '70," he said, "with the news of Sedan!" and his eye fell on the marked paragraph. It related the details of a society wedding—the wedding of a certain Sir Edmund Frockmorton with Cristine Mountjoy.

He did not go on to learn by whom the bishop was assisted, or what the bridesmaids wore, but threw the paper suddenly to the floor and turned to the Professor, with white lips: "That was the woman I—but who are you to give me again this cursed newspaper, that I read and wept over twenty years ago?"

He was speaking English now, and when the Professor spoke, he too used that tongue, speaking slowly with a foreign accent.

"I thought it might be news to you," he said, "it is not every one abroad who has his English papers regularly. And you don't know me?" And he struck a match suddenly, and lighted two candles he had placed on the table.

The other looked long at him, and said, "I do not know you, but before I go I shall know who has used a mask of hospitality that he might insult a wretched old man with that newspaper."

"We parted on the sands out there," said the Professor—"thirty years ago—and my features have changed since then, my hair"—and he ran his hand over the thin, grey crop at the back of his head—"my hair is not chestnut-coloured now, nor do I wear it long." He glanced at his frayed trousers and greasy coat-sleeves. "And his taste in apparel has altered since Mr. Richard Waveney left Balliol."

"I shot Richard Waveney, I killed him years ago," said the *commis-voyageur* in a hollow voice.

"I will not attempt to contradict you," the other went on, "I myself recall that you shot him in the shoulder, but though Waveney died, they extracted the bullet from M. Durand and patched him up, the wretches, to face thirty years misery tempered by schnapps, and until to-day, with the idea that he gave more than he got. And so the lady consoled herself, eh? And the consolation was worth waiting ten years for. A baronet with the freehold of a manufacturing firm is a better *parti* than a squire with an old house, or a poet with a new book—eh, Bisset?"

"You are Waveney," said Bisset, sadly, "you have an echo of his voice, if you've lost his face and walk."

"But you are not Bisset," said the

shrivelled old man, maliciously. "Bisset was a man with certain class prejudices. I believe he detested me from the first, for my undoubtedly mercantile pedigree. It is as well he is dead, my poor Lefevre, I do not think he would have recognised any common humanity in a traveller in scented soap. He would have burnt pastilles where a bagman had been."

"You are Waveney," said Bisset again, and he leaned forward with his face in his hands, rocking himself in the creaking chair. The upright bearing of a man who stands up to face his fate, was fallen away from him, and it left him a broken old man sobbing pitifully and without dignity over lost life and dear hopes.

Seeing these things, Mr. Richard Waveney roused himself from his own thoughts to gird at him again. "There seems to be a General Election going on in England," he said. "I suppose you would have stood for the country like your father before you? By this time the Blues would have been cheering for you in Asgarby market-place, and *she* would be dressed in your colours to sit beside you while they dragged your carriage up to the Hall; unless one of your sons——"

Mr. Waveney paused; he had spoken slowly and deliberately, and seemed to lick

his lips as he spoke. The other man, crouched in his dejection, sobbed again, and withdrew one hand from his unhappy face to tug at an old silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. As he drew it forth a white card fell on the floor—The renowned Orange Flower Soap; represented by Lefevre.

Seeing the card, the *commis-voyageur* turned upon his companion with the scream of an angry child.

"You—you beast!" he cried; "it's all gone. I've lost it all, life and happiness and—it's all gone!" And he rushed at the Professor of English as at one who had suddenly robbed him.

Waveney tottered behind his table and pushed it forward, the tea-cup rolling off to smash itself on the hearthstone. "Keep off me, you old fool!" said he. "I tell you, keep off me. You feel it still, eh?"

"I'd like to have your life," panted Bisset.

"I'd like to bite your throat," said Waveney, from the shelter of the table—and he said it convincingly. "Keep your blood warm till to-morrow morning, if you can——"

He stooped quickly, and re-appeared armed with an empty Schiedam bottle. At sight of this weapon Bissett let go

the table and went back again to his chair, there to weep afresh.

* * * *

The very early morning was coming in over a sad, slate-coloured sea. Sombre early morning, hushed and expectant of the glorious restoration of the *Roi Soleil*.

A trim little gendarme pacing under the trees beyond the quay heard from far away over the sands the twice-repeated bang of a pistol. With a sigh for his lacquered shoes, he pattered down over the pebbles and ran scurrying over the wet beach, still ruled in wavy lines by the retreating sea. No one was in sight, but he made for the black ribs of the English barque grinning out of the sand to the westward. Another bang sounded as he ran—Monsieur, the suicide, was decidedly a bad marksman. He instinctively drew his little rapier, not that he anticipated any need for a weapon, but to give decent official colour to his proceeding. He drew it with a flourish, as he does when the mail-boat comes in to the quay. As he skirted the wreck he came upon a scene which pained and astonished him—an old man, who groaned feebly in the puddle of salt water which had collected under him as he was lying, writhing in his agony. Five

paces away another man, old too, looking strangely out of place in his rusty black coat, was crawling on his knees towards the prostrate man. A duel, without *témoins*, without medical assistance, without journalists? A duel? Say rather a barbarous conflict, a breach of the peace!

A step nearer, and the gendarme could see the kneeling man's white, drawn face, and the red trail where he had crawled. The twenty-franc Belgian revolver of "bulldog" pattern is not a weapon of precision, but its heavy bullet deals a dreadful wound at close quarters. Revolver in hand the Professor had struggled up to his enemy, nerved by his purpose, when Bisset ceased to groan and his limbs to tremble. Seeing this, the Professor let fall the pistol from his bony fingers, and as he laid himself quietly down, a great gout of blood spurted from his breast.

* * * *

"It would appear, my dear," said Sir Edmund Frockmorton, returning to his wife, who was sitting in the sun on the pebble slope, impatiently slapping her little brown boots with the handle of her parasol. "It would appear that two poor unfortunate creatures, at some unearthly hour this morning, while we were all safe in

bed and asleep, actually went and shot one another behind the wreck out there—and the gendarme who found the—er—bodies is telling the crowd out there all about it. These foreigners seem positively delighted.”

“You don’t mean to say that they’ve left the bodies there,” said the lady, nervously.

“The bodies are at the mortuary, but there are not wanting—er—indications of a most shocking affair.”

“Do they know who the poor creatures were?” questioned the lady, pityingly.

“One of them had cards on his person, and would seem to have been a—er—commercial traveller of some description.”

“I didn’t know that persons of that class fought duels,” said Lady Frockmorton; “but I dare say it was some gambling quarrel. I am more than ever glad, Edmund, that I forbade your playing at that sinful *chemin de fer* betting game in the Casino yesterday. I hope you see now what comes of it. The wind is blowing out to sea now, so if you want to smoke cigars you must move your camp-stool on to the sands.”

The white-whiskered old gentleman moved dutifully away. Lady Frockmorton watched the neat little figure in its light

grey tourist suit walk slowly down to the sand before she turned again to her novel. She was a well-preserved woman for her age, and a long course of novel reading had kept her heart young.

“After all,” she said, and sighed, “it was very romantic of them.”

A LIFE SENTENCE.

THEY had come out together on the lawn, from the room that was too small to hold two men and their anger.

Mildenhall's sudden rage had kept him as yet from realising the full meaning of the torn letter which had fallen from the lace at his wife's bosom as she left the dinner-table three minutes before. She had swept away, trailing her silks after her, unconscious. Every fresh thought flushed his face anew, and his fingers convulsively crumpled or rolled the scraps of paper that he clung to with both hands.

"Oh, you scoundrel! Oh, you d——d scoundrel!"

The half-light from the drawn blinds fell on the letter—the foolish letter, in Kingsmark's handwriting—and fell, too, on Kingsmark's white, hardened face, that seemed to peer with a piteous curiosity at what so little time ago was the face of his friend. His friend, his dear old friend,

A LIFE SENTENCE.

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whom he had so basely betrayed—and that not for love's sake, but in the climax of a series of weak concessions to the foolish passion of his friend's wife.

The broken voice went on, sounding wearily, like the voice of one who has spoken a long time.

And if anyone had told me, Jack—only five minutes back—before I——that you——O you d——d scoundrel!"

At the fresh blaze of wrath Kingsmark put up his arm instinctively.

"Keep off," he said, speaking for the first time.

The action put a new thought into Mildenhall's madness. With a scream like an animal in pain the big yellow-bearded man threw himself upon Kingsmark, and hurled him to the ground. As they rolled over together Kingsmark felt hands at his throat. His eyes swam in his head—the clutch released for an instant, and before it tightened again his fingers found what they sought in his breast pocket.

Mildenhall was kneeling on him and laughing hysterically; speech was impossible to Kingsmark—he tried it—then forgetting everything but that life and senses were leaving him—he struck upwards with all his ebbing force.

A tremor ran through the fingers at his

throat, and their clasp was loosened. He struggled to his knees.

Evelyn Mildenhall seemed to be sitting against the tulip bank with his head thrown back, and his beard pointing upward, just as it used to do when he let off his great peal of laughter at some jest of his friend's.

"Evelyn!" No answer. Then the blood rushed into the forehead of the man who realised now what he had done. He stepped back into the house and threw on his hat and inverness. When he returned he leaned over Mildenhall and stroked his hair with his hand. The man was dead, but the man who had killed him could not think of that now. All his senses were strangely alive to trifles.

Through the open window he could see the dining-room as they had left it—the chairs thrust back, the cigar-box open on the table, the wine still in the glasses. One of the two who had sat there was dead, the one who was alive hardly knew which. The turf was wet. Had a shower fallen? At dinner *she* had complained of the heat, and languidly predicted rain. Mildenhall's head, lying back like that, must be crushing one of the tulips. Naturally an unobservant man, Kingsmark noticed for the first time that tulip-cups shut at night.

Something was shining at Mildenhall's breast. The silver figure of a contadina hafting the stiletto that slew him. Why was there not more blood? Kingsmark had bought that stiletto and the silver candlesticks now on the table within, the day the two came away from Pisa at the end of that long holiday in the sun. He could leave it there safely. No man had looked at it since, but he who had bought it and carried it for two years in his breast, and the dead man who had it now in his heart. He took his eyes from the hilt, shut them, and turned away his head. When he opened them again he stooped to pick up something white from the turf—a torn letter—on whose turned-up corner he read "Darling Hetty."

Thrusting this into his waistcoat pocket, he went down the avenue with head bent, his boots crunching the moist gravel on the path, now lit up and spangled by the moonlight.

His old friend—

Long ago they had sworn that the one who died first should return to meet and greet the other on his way. Kingsmark wished that this could be, for then his last memory of his friend would be a reproachful face—better memory than the white throat thrown back in the moonlight.

He shuddered, and reached out his hands as he walked, as one does struggling to break a nightmare.

Someone was speaking. He had walked into the little lane of light cast by a policeman's lantern.

"Good-night," he answered in his dream.

"Looks like more rain, sir."

"I fear so," said Kingsmark, and hurried on to escape the coming shower.

His old friend! He almost felt the accustomed arm thrown across his shoulder.

No thought of flight; he was tired, and to-morrow showed dimly at the end of the long sleep awaiting him. Mildenhall had always walked this road with him, and now Mildenhall was dead. Kingsmark wished he was dead too—but perhaps that was only part of the craving for sleep which oppressed him. But it was his first definite thought since Mildenhall, cigar in mouth, had picked the torn letter from the floor under the empty chair at the table head.

Another policeman was standing at his gate when Kingsmark fitted his latchkey to the lock. Kingsmark wondered at the strange voice with which he gave good-night to this man.

When he had lighted a candle in his bedroom he leaned his hands on the dress-

ing table and looked long and curiously at the white face that stared at him out of the mirror's dark depths. It was interesting to see the face of a man who had He threw himself on the bed at the last pitch of exhaustion.

Knock—knock—knock! What was it—was someone making a coffin? Hammer—hammer—hammer! No; it was someone at the front door, and a bell was clanging loudly in the empty kitchen.

Kingsmark instinctively tore off his coat and put on a dressing-gown before he went down.

As he shot back the heavy bolts of the front door he was conscious of a light through the ground glass, and of voices without.

"Well, what's up?" he was surprised to hear himself say as he saw two policemen standing on the doorstep. The night smelt sweet of wet earth and leaves.

"Mr. Mildenhall, sir—he's dead, sir—murdered."

"Good God!" Kingsmark leaned against the doorpost, fighting for breath to say, "I killed him."

"Yes, sir. In his front garden—a knife in 'is 'eart, sir," put in the other policeman.

Kingsmark rubbed his hand across his eyes and looked at it as if he expected to see something on it.

"I was asleep," he said.

"You see," went on the policeman, apologetically; "we come to you through you bein' so well known ter be 'is best friend—and 'avin' bin seen with 'im last of all."

"What?" said Kingsmark.

"Why, sir, sure you're heavy with sleep, or you'd remember meetin' us as usual, and us givin' you good-night, sir—don't ye recollect?"

"You saw me walking with Mr. Mildenhall to-night?"

"Yes, yes, sir; course I did. Come, sir, rouse yourself."

Kingsmark held his two hands over his head and said.

"Tell me again."

"Again and again, sir," answered the man, with some temper. "I see him and you as usual, an' I see I'm leave you at your door; and I see 'im go back 'ome and I give 'im good-night, but 'e never answered. An, then my mate, 'e sees the light an' the window open, an' went in an' found the poor gentleman stone dead on 'is own lawn with 'is 'ead among the toolips."

Kingsmark's hands tightened their clasp. The dead man had kept his promise then, and had walked with him that night. A ghost had paced by his side—a ghost's arm had lain on his shoulder—a ghost had come back—the murdered man had saved the murderer. How curious.

Kingsmark burst out laughing, and fell at the policeman's feet.

They roused him—or what was left of him. The best part of him lay on the lawn among the tulips.

A stupid sense of clinging to life with both hands possessed him. Mildenhall had saved his life; he dared not throw it away. He was condemned to *live*. He went through an inquest—or dreamed he did—answering questions mechanically with a growing wonder to find his answers believed. What fools people were! And he the greatest fool of all. His old friend!

Kingsmark thinks he went mad a little after this. They called it brain fever. When he got better he tried to tell himself Mildenhall was not dead—had gone to a far country. But even that last rag—the one thing that let any meaning remain to life—was torn from him, for Mildenhall's widow came to see him.

"My darling," she cried, throwing her arms round him, "how terrible all this

has been, but I am all your own now."

He did not answer, but she felt the repulsion of denial in the contact of him.

The common-place, pretty face, framed in the yellow hair and widow's bonnet, darkened. Then she spoke, reasonably, softly, with the little lisp Mildenhall had loved to hear.

"Jack, dear, of course it's very shocking and all that. But really it ought to bring us together. Why should it part us?"

He drew himself up and laid his dry lips against her little red mouth. This, too, was part of his life sentence.

"Why, indeed?" he said, with a shiver. And sat with his head bowed in the shadow of the night coming.

MAD

OR

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